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HUGH CRICHTON'S ROMANCE

VOL. I.



HUGH CRICHTON'S ROMANCE

BY

CHRISTABEL R. COLERIDGE

AUTHOR OF 'LADY BETTY'

Robe is a Present for a Mighty King

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

London

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1875

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PART I.

HUGH'S STORY.

‘The light that never was on sea or land.’

CHAPTER 1.

VIOLANTE.

Elle était pâle et pourtant rose,
Petite, avec de grands cheveux,
Elle disait souvent, 'Je n'ose,'
Et ne disait jamais, 'Je veux.'

THE sunshine of a summer evening was bathing Civita Bella with an intensity of beauty rare even in that fair Italian town. When the shadows are sharp, and the lights clear, and the sky a serene and perfect blue, even fustian and broadcloth have a sort of picturesqueness, slates and bricks show unexpected colours, and chance tree tops tell with effect even in London squares and suburbs. Then harsh tints harmonise and

homely faces look fair, while fair ones catch the eye more quickly ; every flower basket in the streets shows whiter pinks and redder roses than those which were passed unseen in yesterday's rain, the street gutters catch a sparkle of distant streamlets, and the street children at their play group into pictures. For the sun is a great enchanter, and nothing in nature but sad human hearts can resist his brightness. Civita Bella needed no adventitious aid to enhance its beauty. The fretted spires and carved balconies, quaint gables and decorated walls, were the inheritance of centuries of successful art, and their varied hues were only harmonised by the years that had passed since some master spirit had given them to the world, or since they had grown up in obedience to the inspiring influence of an art-loving generation. Down a side street, apart from the chief centres of modern life, stood an old ducal palace. The very name of its princely owners had long

ago faded out of the land, and no one alive bore on his shield the strange devices carved over its portico. It lay asleep in the sunshine, lifting its broken pinnacles and mutilated carvings to the blue sky, still beautiful with the pathetic beauty of 'the days that are no more.'

The old palace was let in flats, and on one of the upper stories flower-pots and muslin curtains peeped gaily out of the dim, broken marbles with a kind of pleasant incongruity, like a child in a convent.

Within the muslin curtains was a long, spacious room, with inlaid floor and coloured walls, with a broad band of bas-reliefs round the top leading the eye to the carved and painted ceiling above. There was very little furniture, a grand piano being the most conspicuous object, and the lofty windows were shaded by Venetian blinds; but round the farthest, which was partly open, were grouped a few chairs and tables, with an unmistak-

able attempt to give an air of modern, not to say English, comfort to one part of the vast, half-inhabited chamber.

A brown-faced, shrewd-eyed Italian woman, with gold pins in her grey hair and gold beads round her neck, and a young lady in an ordinary muslin dress, were standing together contemplating and criticising a young girl who stood in front of them, dressed in the costume of an Italian peasant. That is to say, she wore a short skirt and a white bodice, but the skirt was of rose-coloured silk, the bodice of fine cambric ; her tiny hat was more coquettish than correct in detail, and the little hands playing with the cross round her neck had surely never toiled for their daily bread. Yet she looked a little tired and a little sad, and her companions were noticing her appearance with the gravity that pertains to a matter of business.

‘I think that will do,’ said the young

lady, in a clear, decided voice. ‘She looks very pretty.’

‘Oh, bella—bellissima!’ said the old Italian woman, clapping her hands. ‘But when is not la signorina charming?’

‘It does not alter her much. Violante, does it inspire you?’

‘I think it is very pretty; and you know, Rosa, I shall be rouged, and perhaps my eyes will be painted if they don’t show enough,’ said Violante, simply.

‘You don’t mind that?’ said Rosa, curiously.

‘No!’ with a half-surprised look in the soft pathetic eyes; ‘I am glad. Then father will not see when I am pale. It will be hidden.’

‘Oh, my child, you will not look pale then. So, Zerlina, you want another bow on your apron; and then this great dress is off one’s mind. We must let father look at you.’

‘Do you think he will say I look handsome enough?’ said Violante, anxiously.

Rosa laughed. ‘I don’t know what he may say, but I am sure of what he will think. And besides, he is not the public. Thank you, Maddalena, we need not keep you now.’ And, as the old woman departed, Rosa took the little muslin apron and began to sew a bright bow on it; while Violante stood by her side, manifestly afraid of injuring her costume by sitting down in it. She looked very pretty, as her sister had said, but her anxious, serious look was little in accordance with her gay stage costume.

‘You see,’ said Rosa, as she pinched up her loops of ribbon, ‘we have a great many friends. All the members of the singing-class will go, so you will not feel that you are acting to strangers.’

‘I think Madame Tollemache will go,’ said Violante.

‘Of course, and her son, and Emily, and they will take Mr. Crichton.’

A sudden brightness came over the girl’s soft eyes and lips, as she stood behind her sister’s chair.

‘Rosa, mia,’ she said, ‘you understand about England. What is it il signor—ah, I cannot say his name—does in his own country?’

‘Violante, you talk a great deal of English, why cannot you learn how to call people’s names? Crichton; Spencer Crichton.’

‘He should not have two hard names,’ said Violante, with a little pout. ‘I would rather call him il signor Hugo.’

‘Well, as you like,’ said Rosa, laughing.

‘And he lives in a beautiful palazzo, with trees and a river?’

‘Does he?’ said Rosa, ‘I should doubt it exceedingly. I dare say he has a very nice house. There are no palaces, Violante, in

England, except for bishops, and for the Queen ; certainly not for bankers.'

'And what is a banker?'

'Well,' said Rosa, a little puzzled in her turn ; 'he takes care of people's money for them ; it is a profession.'

'And he is not noble?'

'No ; but as he has this country-seat, I suppose he has a position somewhat equivalent to what we mean here by noble. You can't understand it, dear ; it is all different. Mr. Crichton works very hard, no doubt, in his own country, and I suppose his long holiday will soon be over.'

Violante started, and as she stood behind her sister's chair, she hid her face for a moment in her hands.

'But his brother is coming—his brother, who so loves art,' she said, after a pause.

'Ah, yes ; then I daresay they will go home together. But you will have this artistic gentleman to look at you on Tuesday ;

and we must take care and please your chief admirer before all.'

'Shall I please him?' said the girl, with a smile shy and yet half-confident.

'I hope so. Signor Vasari's opinion is of importance.' Violante's face fell, as if it were not the manager of the Civita Bella opera-house whose opinion she had thought of such consequence, but she did not speak till a hasty step sounded on the stair without.

'That is father!'

'Yes! Here, the apron is ready; tie it on. Oh, my darling, do not look so frightened; you will spoil it all!'

Violante crept close to her sister and took her hand; her bosom heaved, her mouth trembled. Manifestly either the result of the inspection was of supreme importance, or she greatly feared the inspector.

Rosa kissed her, and, with an encouraging pat on the shoulder, put her away, and

Violante stood with her gay fantastic dress, a strange contrast to the timid, uneasy face of the wearer.

‘ Ah ha, Mademoiselle Mattei ! So ; very pretty, very pretty. But no ; this is fit for a drawing-room. She might go and drink tea with Madame Tollemache at the Consulate ; she might wear it on a Sunday to church.’

‘ Oh, father, I am sure I could not !’ cried Violante, scandalised.

Signor Mattei stood with his head on one side, contemplating her with critical attention, and stroking his long grizzled beard the while. ‘ She will be effaced by the foot-lights and the distance ! More ribbons, Rosa ; more braid, more chains, more gilding. A knot there, a bow *there* ; here a streamer, here some—some effect !’

‘ But, father, Zerlina was only a peasant girl,’ said Violante, timidly.

‘ Tut-tut, what do you know about it ?’ he said, shortly. ‘ A peasant girl ! She is

the sublimated essence of the coquetry and the charm of a thousand peasant girls ; and till you see that, you silly child, you will never be her worthy representative !’

‘I understand, father,’ interposed Rosa, hastily. ‘It is soon done. Will you go and take the dress off, Violante ?’

But as Violante moved, there was the sound of another arrival, and Maddalena announced ‘Il signor Inglese.’

‘Stay, child,’ cried Signor Mattei, as Violante was escaping in haste. She paused with a start which might have been caused by the sudden sound of her father’s voice, for he let his sentences fall much as if he were cracking a nut. ‘Stop ! I have no objection to give the world a tiny sip of the future cup of joy ! What, how will you face the public on Tuesday, if you are afraid of one Englishman, uneducated, a child in Art ?’

The little *cantatrice* of seventeen stood

flushing and quivering as if only one atom of that terrible public were enough to fill her with dread. But perhaps her father's eye was more terrible than the stranger's, for she stood still, a spot of gaudy colour in the centre of the great bare room, yet shrinking like a little wild animal in the strange new cage, where it looks in vain for its safe shady hole amid cool ferns and moss.

Rosa came forward and shook hands with the new comer, saying, in English, 'How do you do, Mr. Crichton? You find us very busy.'

'I hope I am not in the way. I came for one moment to ask if I might bring my brother to the singing-class to-morrow. He is very fond of music.'

The speaker had a pleasant voice and accent, spite of a slight formality of address, and although he carried himself with what Signor Mattei called 'English stiffness,' there was also an English air of health and strength

about his tall figure. The lack of colour and vivacity in his fair grave features prevented their regularity of form from striking a casual observer, just as a want of variety in their expression caused people to say that Hugh Spencer Crichton had no expression at all. But spite of all detractors, he looked handsome, sensible, and well bred, and none of his present companions had ever had reason to say that he was grave because their society bored him, formal because he was too proud to be familiar, or silent because he was too unsympathetic to have anything to say. Such remarks had sometimes been made upon him, but it is always well to see people for the first time under favourable circumstances, and so we first see Hugh Crichton in the old Italian palace, enjoying a private view of the future *prima donna* in her stage dress.

‘We shall be delighted to see your brother, signor,’ said the musician, ‘as your

brother, and, I understand, as a distinguished patron of our beloved art.'

'He would much enjoy being so considered,' said Hugh, with a half smile; and then, to Violante, 'Is that the great dress, signorina?'

'It is only a rehearsal for it,' said Rosa, as Violante only answered by a blush.

'No doubt it is all it should be,' said Hugh.

It was not a very complimentary speech, and Hugh offered no opinion as to the details of the dress. It were hard to say if he admired it. But Violante looked up at him and spoke.

'They don't think it fine enough,' she said.

Hugh gave here a quick sudden glance, and a smile as if in sympathy either with the words or the tremulous voice that uttered them. Then he said something both commonplace and extravagant about painting the lily, which satisfied Signor Mattei, and

astonished Rosa, who thought him a sensible young man, and, saying he was bound to meet his brother, he rather hastily took his leave.

Violante went into her own room and gladly took off Zerlina's dress, for it was hot and heavy, and her shabby old muslin was far more comfortable. She pulled her soft hair out of the two long plaits into which Rosa had arranged it, and let it fall about her shoulders, and then she went to the window and looked out at the deep dazzling blue. She could see little else from the high casement but the carving of the little balcony round it, a long wreath of rich naturalistic foliage among which nestled a dove, with one of its wings broken. Violante's pet creepers twined their green tendrils in and out among their marble likenesses, a crimson passion flower lay close to its white image, and sometimes a real pigeon lighted on the balcony and caressed the broken one.

with its wings. Violante encouraged the pigeons with crumbs and sweet noises, and trained her creepers round her own dove, making stories for it in a fanciful childish fashion, she would go and sing her songs to it, and treat it like a favourite doll. But she took no heed of it now, she gazed past it at the sky as if she saw a vision. She was not thinking of the brilliant dreaded future that lay before her, not consciously thinking of the scene just past. She was only feeling to her very finger tips the spell of one glance and smile. Poor Violante !

CHAPTER II.

MR. SPENCER CRICHTON.

‘Just in time to be too late.’

HUGH CRICHTON walked away from the musician's apartments towards the railway station, where he had promised to meet his brother. His tweed suit and large white umbrella were objects as incongruous with the picturesque scene around him as the somewhat similar figure often introduced into the foreground of photographs of buildings or mountains; but his thoughts, possibly, were less unworthy of the soft and lovely land in which he found himself, were less taken up with the home news which he

expected to receive than perhaps they should have been.

Hugh was scarcely eight and twenty, but the responsibilities of more advanced life had early descended on him, and he owed his present long holiday to a fall from his horse, from the effects of which, truth to tell, he had some time since entirely recovered. But busy men do not often reach Italy, and his friend, the English consul, was about to leave Civita Bella for a more lucrative appointment, and why should not Hugh see as much as possible, when he would never have another chance? 'Never have another chance.' Those words echoed in Hugh's ears and bore for him more than one meaning.

Some thirty years before, the Bank of Oxley, a large town not very far from London, with the old red brick house belonging to it, had descended to a young James Spencer, who thenceforth held one

of the best positions in the neighbourhood. For Oxley was a town of considerable importance, and the Spencers had been bankers there for generations, and had intermarried with half the families round. Nevertheless, when Miss Crichton, sole heiress of Redhurst House, refused Sir William Ribstone to marry Mr. Spencer, it was said by her friends that she might have looked higher, and by his relations that no name, however aristocratic, should have been allowed to supersede the old Spencer, with all its honourable and respected associations. But Lily Crichton laughed and said that Sir William's father had drunk himself to death, and had been known to throw a beef steak at the late Lady Ribstone, and she was afraid that the practices might be hereditary. Mr. Spencer smiled and said that he hoped his friends would find Spencer-Crichton as safe a name as Spencer had been before it, he would not refuse his wife's estate because this condi-

tion was attached to it, and he could come into the Bank every day from Redhurst. And so, in Redhurst House, Mr. and Mrs. Spencer lived and loved each other, and their two sons, Hugh and James were born ; while in course of time the banker's younger brother died, and his three children, Arthur, Frederica, and George, were transferred to their uncle's guardianship, and a little cousin of his wife's, Marion or Mysie Crofton, was left with her eight thousand pounds in the same kind and efficient care.

These boys and girls, all grew up together in the careless freedom of so-called brother and sisterhood, till the sudden death of the father clouded their happiness, and, in the absence of near relations, left all these various guardianships to his wife and to his son Hugh.

It was a great honour for a young man of twenty-five to be so trusted, and a great burden ; but Hugh was sensible and steady,

his cousin Arthur was already nearly of age, and his mother, whose elastic spirits soon recovered more or less from the shock of grief, was, of course, practically responsible for the girls. Hugh's own career at Rugby and at Oxford had been unexceptionable: he had no intention of making his office a sinecure. Conscientious and inflexible both in opinion and action, it would have been strange indeed if at twenty-five he had not been also rather hard and dictatorial; but the mischievous effects of these qualities was much modified by a certain clearness of judgment and power of understanding his own position and that of others which almost seemed to stand him in the stead of skilful tact, or even of gentle charity. He was really just, and, therefore, he saw difficulties as well as duties, and knew exactly where it would be foolish to strain an authority which he was too young to support, where it was wise to take the advice of others, and where it was necessary to de-

pend on himself. He was often lenient in his judgment of others' actions ; but then he thought that there was not much to be expected of most people, and he was seldom made angry, because other people's folly did not signify much as long as he was perfectly sure that he was acting rightly himself. If a man did do wrong he was a coward if he would not own it, even to a child. And so Hugh on the rare occasions when he was cross or unjust, invariably begged pardon. But he did not care at all whether he was forgiven. He had done his part, and if the other side cherished anger, that was their own look out.

The ownership of the bank had descended to him, and he lived with his mother and helped her to manage the Redhurst property, which would some day be his own, fulfilling all his various offices with much credit to himself, and, on the whole, much advantage to other people. For if he thought most of

what was due to himself, his view of his own duty included great attention to the interests of others, even to self-sacrifice on their behalf. Indeed, as his cousin Arthur said, ‘although the old saying might have been parodied with regard to Hugh, that—

‘Though he never *did* a cruel thing,
He never *said* a kind one,’

neither did he ever say anything unkind, so they might all be thankful. Most likely old Hugh thought them all prodigies if they could only see into his heart.’

‘You never were more mistaken in your life, Arthur,’ said Hugh with perfect truth and much coolness.

‘Now, why won’t you take the credit of having some fine feelings to repress?’ said Arthur, who was often guilty of trying to get a rise out of Hugh for the benefit of the younger ones.

But Hugh was so unmoved that he did

not even reply that he did not care about credit.

‘You’ll get a scratch some day, Arthur,’ said James, who nearest in age to Hugh, and exempt from his authority might say what he pleased.

‘Oh no, he won’t,’ said Hugh, with a not unpleasant smile. ‘At least, if he does, I shall be much ashamed of myself.’

‘What?’ said Arthur, ‘I should respect myself for ever if I could put Hugh in a rage.’

‘People should never be in a rage,’ said Hugh—‘they should control themselves.’

‘If they can,’ said Arthur, conscious of the minor triumph of having caused Hugh to be very sententious.

Hugh was silent. It is one thing to have a theory of life, and quite another to mould your character and tame your passions into accordance with it. Years before, when Hugh was at Oxford and James had just left

school for a public office ; they, in the curious repetition and reversal of human events, had come across a certain Miss Ribstone, the daughter of their mother's old admirer, to whose many charms Hugh, then scarcely twenty, fell a victim. For one whole long vacation he had ridden, danced, talked fun and sentiment with her, until the whole thing had been put an end to by the announcement of her engagement to—somebody else. Then Hugh's pride and self-control proved weak defences against the sudden shock, and he met the girl and her half-saucy, half-sentimental demand for congratulations with such passionate reproaches as she never forgot. Probably she deserved them, but the mortification of having so betrayed himself, almost killed regret in Hugh's bosom. 'It was not my fault, I was not to blame,' he said to his brother. 'I should have remembered that,' and as he spoke he made a holocaust of all the notes

and flowers and ribbons he had hitherto cherished.

‘Dear me,’ said sentimental James, ‘what a pity, I keep dozens of them.’

‘I’ll never have another,’ said Hugh.

The incident was only remembered as ‘Hugh’s old flirtation with Nelly Ribstone,’ but Hugh forswore fine ladies and folly, and never forgot that he had once lost all control of his own words and actions. But all that was long ago when he had been a mere boy, not a shadow of sentiment hung over the recollection of it, and Hugh awaited his brother’s arrival at Civita Bella with a certain self-consciousness and desire to appear specially pleased to see him, which perhaps he had not experienced since his relations had been wont to wonder ‘what Hugh *could* be doing *again* at Ribstone House.’ He had not left himself much time to wait, for as he came up to the station, a slender little man in a velvet coat, with a conspicuously

long, silky light brown beard, advanced to meet him.

‘ Ah, Hugh, there you are yourself.’

‘ How d’ye do, Jem? I never knew the train so punctual. I thought I’d ten minutes to spare. I’m so glad you have got your holiday.’

James Spencer would have been a much handsomer man than his brother if he had not been on so small a scale ; as it was, the delicacy of his features, and the fairness of his complexion, gave him something of a finikin aspect ; which was not diminished by the evident pains taken with his dress, hair, and beard ; which were arranged with a view to the picturesque, rather trying to the patience of an ordinary observer. But on a close inspection, he had a good-tempered and kindly expression, which showed that he combined appreciation of other things and people with admiration for himself. And though he was very fond of talking

Bohemianism, he went to his office every morning, and to church every Sunday with the regularity of a Philistine.

‘Well, you look uncommonly jolly,’ he said. ‘The Mum was afraid that as you had made so few expeditions, your back was not strong yet.’

Hugh despised excuses, so we will not suppose that this ready-made one offered him any temptation as he answered—

‘Oh no ; I was quite well a week after I got here. There is plenty to see here, I assure you.’

‘I believe you,’ said James ecstatically. ‘Were ever such colours and such a sky ? Look there,’ seizing his brother’s arm, ‘there’s a girl in a red petticoat—under that arch in the shadow—white on her head—oh !’

‘You will have to get used to girls under archways in red petticoats,’ returned Hugh.

‘How were they all at Oxley ?’

‘Oh, very well ; the mother was groaning

after you. She said she couldn't get the fences mended, and Jones' cow had eaten the geraniums. Oh, and she wants to have a garden-party.'

'Well,' said Hugh, 'what should hinder her having a dozen if she likes?'

'She can't do it without you.'

'Isn't Arthur there?'

'Arthur? yes. But it isn't worth while asking the Miss Clintons to meet Arthur.'

'I should think that chattering Katie Clinton was just the girl he would admire.'

'Should you?' said Jem, rather meaningly. 'However, Hugh, when are you coming home?'

'As soon as you do.'

'I have only a fortnight.'

'Then we can go back together. That church is considered very fine. Look at the spire.'

James looked with undisguised and genuine delight at the fair proportions and

exquisite colouring of the building before him, and after various half-finished and inarticulate expressions of delight, exclaimed :

‘It’s intoxicating ! Can’t we go in ?’

‘Not now. Mrs. Tollemache will be waiting for us. There are a dozen such churches, besides the cathedral, and there’s an old amphitheatre, at least the remains of one.’

‘Perish Oxley and its garden-parties in the ruins of its new town-hall and its detestable station,’ cried James, mock-heroically, and striking an attitude.

‘Then there’s a very good opera,’ said Hugh—‘and oh, wouldn’t the great singing class be in your line to-morrow.’

‘What singing class ?’

‘Why, there’s a certain Signor Mattei here. He is first violin in the opera orchestra, and a very fine musician. I believe he followed music entirely from choice in the first instance.’

‘Then I respect him,’ said James. ‘What could he do better?’

‘Exactly. I thought you would say so. Well, he has a great singing class—more, I suppose, what would be called a choral society.’

‘Yes,’ said Jem; ‘I belong to the Gipsy Singers, and to Lady Newington’s Glee Society, and sometimes I run down to help the choir of that church at Richmond. I took you there once.’

‘Well, Signor Mattei’s class is the popular one here. Tollemache takes his little sister, and having nothing better to do, I joined it. To-morrow is the last of the course, so you can go if you like.’

‘I should like it immensely. Quite a new line for you though.’

‘I don’t see why I should not sing as well as you or Arthur. I mean why I should not attempt it: of course I am no

musician,' said Hugh, who had rather a morbid horror of boasting.

'No,' said Jem, 'I have a theory that people's lives are divided by too sharp lines. They should run into each other. Let each give something out, and each will get light and warmth and colour. Nobody knows how much there is in other people's worlds till they get a peep at them. I should like to teach everybody something of what was most antipathetic to them, and show everyone a little of the society to which he was *not* born, whatever that may be.'

'There's a great deal in what you say,' said Hugh,' so meekly that Jem, on whose theories the sledge hammer of practice was commonly wont to fall, was quite astonished.

'Why, how mild and mellow Italian sunshine is making you. You're a case in point. We shall have you getting that precious town-hall painted in fresco, and

giving a concert in it, at which you'll sing the first solo !'

And James burst into a hearty laugh, in which Hugh joined more joyously and freely than was often his wont. 'Don't you be surprised whatever I do,' he said. 'See if I can't catch some Italian sunshine and bring it home to Oxley ! But here we are, come in, and you'll see Mrs. Tollemache.' James followed his brother ; but an expression of unmitigated astonishment came over his face.

'Hallo ! there's something up,' he ejaculated under his breath. '*Is* it Miss Tollemache ?'

CHAPTER III.

THE SINGING CLASS.

The little maiden cometh,
She cometh shy and slow,
I ween she seeth through her lids
They drop adown so low.

.
She blusheth red, as if she said
The name she only thought.

‘So you mean to accompany our party, Mr. James Crichton, to the singing-class? I am very glad that you should go,’ said Mrs. Tollemache.

‘Yes, for you will see Violante!’ cried her daughter, Emily.

Mrs. Tollemache was a little gentle lady, who, spite of several years of widowhood,

spent in keeping house for her son in Civita Bella, always looked as if she were ready for an English country Sunday, with her soft grey dresses and white ribbons, slightly unfashionable, not very well made, and yet unmistakably lady-like, just as the diffidence and unreadiness of her manner did not detract in the least from its good breeding. Her daughter was a tall girl of sixteen, with bright, straight falling hair, and a rosy face, simple and honest, though her frank, fearless manners, and capacity for conversation, indicated a young lady who had seen something of the world. Her brother, the consul, many years her elder, represented English diplomacy in a pleasant, cheery, if not very deep or astute fashion to the benighted foreigners by whom he was surrounded.

‘And who is Violante?’ asked James.

‘Violante,’ said Mr. Tollemache, ‘is the rising star of Civita Bella.’

‘Violante,’ said Emily, ‘is the dearest,

sweetest, most beautiful creature in the world!’

‘Violante,’ said Mrs. Tollemache, ‘is a very sweet young person, whose mother I knew something of formerly, and whose sister gives Emily music and Italian lessons.’

‘She is Signor Mattei’s daughter?’ said Hugh.

‘I will tell you all about her, Mr. Crichton,’ said Emily. ‘Signorina Rosa—that’s her sister—brings her to talk Italian with me. But some time ago they found out that she had a wonderful voice, and so she is to go on the stage. She is to make her first appearance next Tuesday, as Zerlina in “Don Giovanni;” but the odd thing is that she hates it, she is so shy. Fancy hating it, I wish I had the chance!’

‘Emily, my dear!’ ejaculated her mother.

‘A couple of nights will rub off all that,’ said Mr. Tollemache, ‘even if it is genuine.’

‘Genuine!’ cried Emily. ‘For shame,

Charles. She cannot help it, and even singing in the class has not cured her. It is quite true, isn't it, Mr. Crichton?' turning to Hugh.

Hugh paused for a moment, and—Jem could hardly believe his eyes—blushed, as he answered decidedly, 'Yes, but she is more afraid of her father than of the public.'

'Dear me,' said James, 'this sounds very interesting. And she is a beauty, too, Hugh?'

'I don't know if you would consider her so. I do, undoubtedly!' said Hugh, with a sort of desperate gravity.

'Very unlikely acquaintance for old Hugh,' thought James. 'See if I submit to any more criticisms about my mixed society. Is she very young?' he said aloud.

'Oh, yes,' said Mrs. Tollemache. 'You see, the circumstances are altogether peculiar. These two sisters are most excellent

girls, and knowing their antecedents, and having them here as occasional companions for Emily, I could not, I cannot suppose that anything would ever accrue to cause me to repent the arrangement.'

There was a peculiar emphasis in Mrs. Tollemache's manner of making this remark, and it was accompanied by a little blush and nervous movement of her knitting needles.

'It must be a very pleasant kind of place,' said James, wondering if Charles Tollemache found this young songstress too bewitching.

'Yes, but perhaps it is not altogether inopportune that our leaving Civita Bella should coincide with Violante's *début*. Things will be altered now, and I shall wish Emily to have more regular instruction.'

'Mamma, I shall love Violante as long as ever I live,' said Emily, 'and I should not care if she sang at fifty operas.'

‘You must go to school, Emmy,’ said her brother, ‘and attend to the three R’s with twopence extra for manners.’

‘I shall not mind if you will send me to that nice school Mr. Crichton was talking about, where the governess is nearly as young as I am,’ said Emily.

‘Not quite,’ said Hugh, laughing. ‘I only told you Miss Venning had a young sister.’

‘I shall ask Mr. Spencer Crichton about it,’ said Mrs. Tollemache.

‘Have you been telling them about Oxley Manor?’ said James. ‘I am sure Flossy Venning *is* the governess, whatever she may be called. You would make friends with our girls, Miss Tollemache?’

‘Yes, I should like that. But now I want to show you my friend, and if we don’t make haste we shall be late,’ said Emily, as she ran out of the room.

The little party of English took their

way through the quaint and richly coloured streets of the Italian city to Signor Mattei's apartments, and James could not repress his exclamations of delight at every patch of colour, every deep full shadow, and every graceful outline that met his eye. Emily pointed out the various lions, and asked questions in her turn about the England which was but a dim memory of her childhood, her bright English face gaining perhaps something of an added charm from its fair foreign setting, and itself giving just the last touch of piquante contrast to her companion's sense of delightful novelty.

Young ladies never came amiss to James, and in the intervals of his raptures he amused himself by drawing out Emily's ideas of English society derived from much and earnest study of such novels and tales as Mrs. Tolle-mache allowed her to peruse, and which had evidently rendered Sunday-school teachings, parsonages, riding in the park, pic-

tics, sportsmen, smoke, and rain, as great a jumble of picturesque confusion as Italian palaces and *prima donnas* might be to James. Such a state of mind entertained him, and while Hugh walked silently beside Mr. Tollemache, he persuaded her to express her admiration of 'The Daisy Chain' and 'Dr. Thorne,' her fervent wish to resemble the heroines of the former book; her rather more faintly expressed supposition that English country squires were like Frank Gresham; her desire to be kind to little girls in straw hats, and old women in red cloaks—though Mr. Crichton says he never saw an old woman in a red cloak—and her evident belief that benevolent rectors, honest cottagers, and useful young ladies, were plenty as blackberries in the England that was a land of romance for her. 'How delightful it would be to know such!'

'I am afraid you will be disappointed, Miss Tollemache,' said James. 'Our lives

in England are very commonplace, and the real Frank Greshams are rather stupid fellows, who wear muddy boots, care for little but riding and shooting, and are out of doors all day.'

'But that seems so manly,' said Emily, with a romantic vision of heather and mists, mountains and dashing streams, floating before her imagination.

'Well,' said James, 'I suppose the romance is in people's hearts, and anything may be picturesque if you can get the right point of view, and see it in the right light, and the truest artists are those who have the quickest insight, and the widest sympathies. But your dazzling beauty in this Palace of Art that we are approaching seems more like romance to me.'

'Violante?' said Emily, to whom the first part of his speech had been an enigma. 'Oh, there is nothing romantic about her.'

She's just a *cantatrice*, you know, but she is a dear little thing, and I love her.'

As Emily spoke they were mounting the great marble staircase that led to Signor Mattei's apartments, and presently entered the long room, now arranged for the convenience of the musical performance that was about to take place. James looked round at the painted walls and delicate carvings, faded and injured, yet still soft and harmonious. This was a wonderful enchanted palace; where was the fairy princess? He was presented to Signor Mattei, who, in very good English, expressed his pleasure at seeing him there, and found him a place. Rosa came and offered him a copy of the music that they were going to sing, and as his companions took their seats, and the performance began, he had leisure to study, not his score, but the motley scene around him.

Signor Mattei was a tall striking man, with a long grizzled beard, a narrow face with a high forehead and ardent enthusiastic eyes. His long slender fingers looked as if they would have been at home on any instrument, and indeed he was a first-rate violinist as well as an admirable musician, and as he stood before the class conducting and teaching, he seemed pervaded by his art from top to toe, and though James could not follow his rapid vehement Italian, he perceived that no imperfection escaped him. Hugh's hint that he might have held a different position but for his youthful musical enthusiasm seemed credible enough in sight of his refined features and fervid eyes.

He was a very popular teacher, and the class was a large one. Three or four English girls like Emily Tollemache attended it, whose fair rosiness and bad singing were alike conspicuous. Several slim, dark, demure Italian signorinas, with downcast eyes,

shy or passionate, under charge evidently of elder ladies, were to be seen. Some looked like teachers, and the professional air of some caused James to guess that they were being prepared for the stage, or perhaps, their education already finished, were assisting the class with their voices. The men were mostly young teachers or singers, except Hugh and Mr. Tollemache, and an enthusiastic English curate, music-mad, who was taking a holiday in Italy.

But where was the most beautiful creature in the world? James looked for her in vain. She was Italian, she was going to sing on the stage, she was a wonder of beauty. Which could she be?

A handsome girl, with splendid black eyes and crisp black hair, who was standing at the end of the sopranos and singing with a clear fine voice, suggested herself to James as the most likely person. Certainly she was very handsome, but she did not

look a bit shy ; however, Tollemache had insinuated a suspicion that shyness was interesting. She looked frank and bright, bold enough to face a crowd. Very picturesque, she knew that pomegranates became her. A model for any artist ; but rather an unlikely friend for Miss Tollemache, and a very unlikely——here James' thoughts suddenly pulled themselves up with a start. 'What an absurd fellow old Hugh is !' he mused. 'Some one has been chaffing him about these classes, and he stands on his dignity until anyone would imagine—but *that* girl, oh dear, no !'

Suddenly there was a pause for the solo. Emily looked at James and nodded. Hugh gazed intently at his score. The dark beauty sat down, and a girl in grey, with a coral necklace, came forward and stood in front, alone. She stood in the full stream of the dusty evening sunlight, and James thought, 'Why, this is no beauty, they are mad !'

She was tall rather than otherwise, and very slim. Her soft misty hair was twisted loosely about her head, and fell partly on her neck; it was of so dull a shade of brown that the sunshine whitened it instead of turning it to gold. Her skin was fair for an Italian, and now pale even to the lips. Her eyes were large, dark, and soft, and in them there dwelt an expression of terror that marred whatever beauty they might otherwise have possessed. She did not blush and bridle with a not unbecoming shyness, but she looked, as the saying goes, frightened to death.

‘Poor little thing, what a shame to make her sing!’ thought James, ‘but she is no beauty at all.’

And yet, what was it? Was it the fall of her hair, the curve of her cheek, or the piteous setting of her mouth, that made him look again and again as she began to sing? James really loved music, and the sweet bird-

like notes entranced him. It seemed the perfection of voice and execution, and the tones were full of power and pathos. She stood quite still with her hands before her—for she had no music—little child-like hands, and she never smiled or used her eyes, hardly moved her head, the voice seemed produced without effort, and she made no attempt to add to its effect. When it ceased there was an outburst of applause; she looked towards her father, and at a sign from him made the ordinary elaborate curtsy of a public singer; but still with never a smile. Then she went back to her place, and as she passed Hugh he whispered a word. She hung down her head and passed on, but her face changed as by magic, and then James knew that she was beautiful.

She did not sing again, her father was very chary of her voice, and she did not come forward when the music was over, though Signor Mattei hoped 'il signor' had

been pleased, and Emily lingered, spite of her brother's sign to her to make haste.

‘Indeed,’ said James, ‘I have been delighted; one does not often hear a voice like your daughter’s.’

‘Her voice is good,’ said the father, ‘but she does not give it a chance; she has no notion what study was in my day.’

‘Oh, father!’ said Rosa Mattei, as these words were evidently intended to reach the ears of Violante, who was standing at a little distance. ‘She does practise, but she is so soon tired. My sister is only seventeen,’ she added to James; ‘and her voice is not come to its full strength yet.’

‘She must not over-strain it—it is so beautiful,’ said James, while Emily echoed—

‘Oh, it is lovely! oh, cara Violante, come here and let us tell you how beautifully you sang.’

‘Violante!’ said her father; and she came towards them, while James on a nearer

view saw how lovely were the curves of cheek and throat, and how delicate the outline of the still white features. With a view to hearing her speak, he thanked her for her song, and said—

‘ I suppose I need not ask you if you are fond of music ? ’

Violante cast down her eyes, blushed, and stammered out under her breath,

‘ Yes, Signor, thank you ; ’ while her father said, ‘ My daughter is very glad to have given you pleasure, and very grateful to those who are kind enough to express it. You must excuse her, Signor, she is not used to strangers.’

The poor child looked ready to sink into the earth beneath this public notice of her bad manners. Hugh looked so stern and fierce that, had he asked the question, she might well have feared to answer him ; but Emily broke the awkward silence by saying eagerly—

‘ You will come and give me my lesson to-morrow, Signorina Rosa? Will Violante come too?’

‘ I am afraid,’ said Rosa, ‘ that she will be too busy.’

‘ Ah, well, I shall see her if she does not see me, next Tuesday. Good-bye, Violante. Good-bye, Signorina.’

‘ Why!’ exclaimed James, as they emerged into the street, ‘ That poor girl looked frightened to death.’

‘ Oh,’ said Emily, ‘ she is always frightened before strangers. How ever she will sing on Tuesday I cannot think; but what do you think of her, Mr. Crichton?’

‘ I think she is very pretty,’ said James, rather dryly.

‘ A pretty little simpleton,’ said Mr. Tollemache: ‘ but a month or two’s experience will make all the difference. It is to be hoped her father will take care of her. But I believe she has an admirer—the

manager of the operatic company here—so I suppose she may be considered very fortunate. Her voice is valuable, and she will be very handsome.'

James nodded assent, but something in the thought of the young childish girl with her shy solemn face and frightened eyes touched him.

'It's rather a case of "Heaven sending almonds to those who have no teeth," isn't it?' he said. 'Poor little thing!'

'Oh, the almonds will taste sweet enough, I daresay,' said Mr. Tollemache. 'If not, they must be swallowed, somehow.'

'Well,' said Emily, 'on Tuesday we shall see how she gets on.'

CHAPTER IV.

THE MATTEI FAMILY.

Then joining hands to little hands
Would bid them cling together,
For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather.

‘VIOLANTE! Will you never learn common-sense? Your want of manners will give perpetual offence. And let me tell you, English people of influence are not patrons to be despised. It is always well for a *prima donna* to have irreproachable private friends. If ever we should go to England, and the Signora Tollemache would notice you, it would be a great advantage; and not amiss that those young men should report well of you.’

‘ Oh, father ! ’

‘ Why ! They see your name announced. They say, “ Ah, Mademoiselle Mattei ! We knew her in Italy—pretty—fine voice. My friend, you should go and see her.” They take a bouquet and applaud you ; and you become the fashion. You should be grateful, and show it. But you—you are a musical box ! You sing like a statue, like a wax-doll. Ah, where is your fire and your expression ? You have no soul—you have no soul ! ’

‘ Father, I did try.’

‘ Oh, I have no patience ! Where is my music ? I have a private lesson. Go and practise, child, and study your part better ; ’ and off whisked Signor Mattei in a great hurry, and a much disturbed temper.

Such scenes had been frequent ever since one unlucky day, two years ago, when the great opera manager, Signor Vasari, had heard Violante sing, and had told her father that

she promised to have the sweetest soprano in Italy, and he must educate her for the stage, where she would make her fortune. And the owner of this sweet soprano was so timid that her music-master made her tremble, and possessed so little dramatic power that she could scarcely give a song its adequate expression, and was lost when she attempted to act a part. But the music is all important in Italy, and the middle course of concerts and oratorios did not there lie open to her. Her father hoped that her voice and her beauty would carry off her bad acting, and that perpetual scolding would cure her fears, since he gloried in her talent, and much needed her gains.

He was, as has been said, fairly well born and well educated, and had chosen music as his profession. When quite young he had gone to England, where he played the violin in London orchestras, and gave private lessons on the piano. In England

he fell in with a young lady, the daughter of a clergyman, who was governess in the family of Mr. Tollemache's uncle, where Signor Mattei taught. Rose Grey was unmistakably a lady, a quiet fair-faced girl, with her share of talent and originality and a passion for music. She fell in love with the handsome enthusiastic Italian, and, having no prospects and no friends to object, she married him. They lived for some time in England, where Rosa was born, and finally returned to Italy. The world went fairly well with them, but they were not without debts and difficulties, and when Rosa grew up, and Madame Mattei's brother, now a London solicitor, wrote to offer her a year or two's schooling in England, the proposal was gladly accepted, since she had no voice and could not be made useful at home. Rosa went to England, went to school, taught Italian and music, and learnt the usual branches of education, spent her holidays

with her uncle, and finally helped to educate her cousins, till, three years before our story opens, her mother died, and Rosa came home to take care of the little Violante, a girl of fourteen. Rosa was then twenty-two, entirely English in manner, accent, and appearance, with pretty brown hair, a sensible face, bright hazel eyes, full of force and character, grave manners, a sweet smile, and a strong will of her own which she was not afraid to enforce if necessary. She had a warm heart, too, with nothing much just then to fill it. She almost idolized the little sister, who clung to her, sobbing out, 'Oh Mamma mia!' and from that day forward guarded, petted, and, it must be confessed, spoiled her.

Violante was delicate and sensitive, with a certain Italian fervour of temperament beneath her timidity, which expended itself in the warmest affection for her sister. She was more Italian than Rosa in appearance,

and though she spoke fluent English, and they used either language when together, her low sweet tones were unmistakably foreign. Her musical education was so pressed on her and took up so much of her time that she learnt little else, and at seventeen was sadly ignorant of much which she ought to have known.

The two sisters belonged to their mother's Church, which unfortunately had the practical effect of their belonging to none at all. When Rosa went to England she did as others did, but it was not her lot to come across anyone of sufficient depth to influence her practical self-reliant temper, and, though a very good and conscientious girl, her education had made her indifferent to the outward duties of religion. She thought that she did her duty by Violante when she prevented her from attending Roman Catholic services unless the music was very fine, and heard her read a chapter in the

Bible on Sunday, while the rest of the day was spent as usual. Madame Mattei had never had health or opportunity to attend English services, and the two girls only went occasionally; though lately, under Mrs. Tollemache's influence, they had been a little more conscious of their nationality and the duties involved in it. Rosa impressed Violante with a strong sense of the necessity of doing right, and believed that circumstances absolved her from attending to anything further. Violante was of a different mould, and when she saw beautiful ritual and devout worshippers she felt sad, she did not know why,

Rosa was well aware that she could not protect Violante from the approaching ordeal of her first appearance, and knew too of debts that rendered it necessary; but she interposed between her sister and many a reproof, and tried by her alternate coaxing, sympathy, and argument to diminish the

girl's dread of the future that lay before her. Violante had made fewer complaints of late, and Rosa hoped that she was becoming more reconciled to the inevitable.

On the present occasion Rosa's pleasant cheerful voice was heard talking to Maddalena, who, besides doing all their housework, took Violante to her lessons and rehearsals when Rosa was busy, the latter retaining her English habit of walking alone. She re-entered the room as her father quitted it, and began to divest it of its concert-room air, to put away music-stands and books, and to give once more a look of English comfort to the further end of it, where Violante had thrown herself into a big chintz-covered chair, turning her face towards the cushion, when Rosa said,

‘Well dear, you were very successful to-day. I never heard you in better voice.’

‘I wish—I wish I had no voice at all.’

‘Violante! That is really quite wrong.’

You should not despise such a glorious gift.'

'It only makes me wretched. Oh, what shall I do !'

Now Rosa had resolved against weak-minded sympathy, and had made up her mind that her sister must not, at this last moment, be permitted to flinch, so, though the hidden face and despairing attitude went to her heart, she replied briskly,

'Do? Win a dozen bouquets and bring the house down. What a silly child you are, Violante !'

Violante lifted her head, astonished at the shadow of a reproof from Rosa, who little guessed at the tumult of feeling that was making the poor child's heart beat so terribly.

'You angry, too, Rosa !' she said, for reproaches never made Violante angry, only miserable.

'Angry, my darling, no,' exclaimed Rosa.

‘I only want you to take heart and courage. My child, don’t cry so dreadfully. What is it, did father scold you?’

Violante crept into the warm comforting embrace, and, laying her head on Rosa’s shoulder, wept so bitterly that her sister could only think how to soothe her; till Violante’s sobs grew quieter and she put up her quivering lips to be kissed, while Rosa smoothed back her hair and began to try the effect of argument.

‘You see, darling, father is so anxious. When Tuesday is over and he sees how successful you are, he will be delighted. And you will feel quite differently. Just think of the pleasure of seeing everyone hanging on your voice, and of hearing the applause, and seeing the bouquets thrown at you!’ (Violante shivered.) ‘Oh! it would be worth living for.’

‘Oh, Rosa mia, if the voice was yours!’

‘Ah, if—But, darling, I shall be as much

pleased to see your triumph as if it were mine.'

'But if I fail—and my bad acting—'

'You won't fail. And as for the acting, you will act much better when you are less nervous. People will care for your voice and your beauty—they won't be hard on you.'

'Rosa, you are so different, you cannot understand. I should not mind so much about failing if it did not vex father. It is doing it at all. When I stand up to sing it is as if all the eyes turned me cold and sick, and my own eyes get dizzy so that I cannot see, and if they applaud—even here at the class—it is like the waves of the sea, and I cannot sleep at night for thinking of it.'

'You don't know how pleasant the real applause will be,' said Rosa, feeling as if she were telling a snowdrop to hold up its head, for the sun was so pleasant to stare at. What could she say to the child, who had

no vanity and no ambition—nothing but a loving heart.

‘You will like to please me and father?’

‘Yes,’ said Violante, ‘but if I should cry, father would—would—’

‘Oh, nonsense, you won’t cry.’

‘If father would let me—I would rather teach singing all day!’

‘But you know you could not make nearly so much money in that way. And father wants the money, Violante, indeed he does.’

‘Oh yes—I know it must be done—I will not make a fuss.’

‘That’s a good child. And you will not have to sing only to strangers. Think how kind the Tollemaches are to us, how pleased they will be with you.’

Violante flushed to her very finger tips, and Rosa felt her heart throb.

‘They will not like me *then*,’ she murmured.

‘Not like you, what can you mean? Why should they not like you?’

‘English people don’t like actresses.’

‘Well, but you don’t suppose Mrs. Tolle-mache has any prejudice of that sort?’

‘She would not like Emily to do it.’

‘Emily! Of course not. Young ladies like Emily don’t sing in public. She would not be a governess or do anything to get her living. But they would think it quite right for you. Why, you will have Mr. Crichton and his brother to throw bouquets at you!’

‘Yes!’ exclaimed Violante, with sudden passion. ‘He will throw bouquets at *me*. He will “tell his friends I am pretty,” and he will think—’

‘He? Mr. Crichton? Violante, what can it matter to you what he thinks?’

Violante shrank away from her sister, and covered her face with her hands.

‘Violante,’ cried Rosa, too anxious to pick her words, ‘don’t tell me you have

been so silly as to think about him—that you have let yourself care for him——’

‘Oh—I do—I do, with all my heart,’ cried Violante, with all the fervour of her Italian nature, speaking from her shining eyes and parted lips.

‘What has he said to you—what has he done? He has not made love to you—child—surely.’

‘I don’t know,’ murmured Violante.

‘Oh, I must have been mad—what have I been doing to let this go on?’ cried Rosa, starting up and walking about in her agitation, while Violante cowered, frightened, into the great chair, but with a certain self-assertion in her heart, too.

‘Now,’ said Rosa, recovering prudence, and sitting down on the arm of the chair, ‘you see, I have not taken care of my pretty sister. Tell me all about it.’

‘You are not angry with me, Rosa?’

‘Angry, my little one,’ said Rosa, while tears, rare in her eyes, fell on her cheeks—
‘no, only angry with myself. Now, tell me what it is; how long have you felt in this way? What has he said to you?’

‘Ah, how can I tell? He looks at me—he gives me flowers—he speaks to my heart,’ said Violante with downcast eyes, but lips that smiled and needed no sympathy in their satisfaction.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said poor Rosa, irritated both by the smile and the sentiment. ‘Is that all?’

‘He told me of his home—he said we should be friends—he asked me for a rose, and kissed my hand for it—he said he thought it was Italian fashion.’

‘Oh, Violante, why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘Oh,’ with a funny little air of superiority, ‘one does not think of telling.’

Rosa pressed Violante tight in her arms, and set her lips hard, and when she spoke it was very low and steadily.

‘My child, you know how I love you, that I only think how to make you happy. Mr. Crichton had no right to play with you so; but it was my fault for letting you be thrown in his way. Young men will do those things, just to amuse themselves.’

‘Some will.’

‘*Some?*’ said Rosa bitterly. ‘You little foreign girl — he would think of you just as of a pretty flower, to please him for a time, and then he will go home and leave you to repent that you have ever known him!’

‘Never—never,’ cried Violante, clasping her hands. ‘Never—if my heart should break.’

Rosa stamped her foot, and hot, cruel tears, that burnt as they fell, half choked her.

‘I dare say he has never thought that you would take what he said seriously. If he likes you, he could not marry you—he must marry some English girl of his own rank. You must put him out of your head, and I must take better care of you.’

Violante’s views of the future were scarcely so definite as these words implied, but she shivered, and a chill fell on her spirits.

‘Now,’ said Rosa, ‘I believe Signor Vasari does really care for you.’

‘Signor Vasari! I hate him!’ cried Violante. ‘Rosa, I will be good—I will act—I will sing—but I will not hear of Signor Vasari. If he kissed me, I would kill him!’

‘For shame, Violante, that is a very improper way of speaking. Oh, my child, will you promise me to be good?’

Violante did not answer. Was there a secret rebellion in the heart that had always given Rosa back love for love?

‘Violante mia—you don’t think me unkind to you?’

Violante looked up and smiled, and taking Rosa’s face between her two little hands, covered it with sweet, fond kisses.

‘Rosa, carissima mia, shall you do anything?’

‘No,’ said Rosa, considering. ‘I think not. If you will be a good child, and steady—now father will be coming back.’

‘Oh, you will not tell him?’

‘No, no—certainly not; but you have not practised.’

‘I could not sing a note!’

‘No, not now,’ said Rosa steadily. ‘You must drink some coffee, and go and lie down for a little. And then you must bathe your eyes, and put up your hair, and come and sing for as long as father wishes.’

Violante obeyed, and Rosa having administered the coffee, and seen that no more tears were likely to result from solitude, left

her to rest, and came back to await her father and consider the situation. She did not like the look of it at all. Violante was a good, obedient child, who tried to do as she was told, and had no power to rebel against fate. But she knew nothing of self-conquest or of self-control, and when she was unhappy had no thought but to cling to Rosa, and cry till she was comforted; while under all her timidity lay the power of a certain fervour of feeling against which she had never dreamed of struggling. Sweet and humble, innocent and tender, yet with a most passionate nature, how could she contend with feelings which were more

‘Than would bear
Of daily life the wear and tear,’

how endure the pangs of disappointment, added to the strain of an uncongenial life?

‘I think she will break her heart,’ thought Rosa to herself. But then arose the con-

solatory thought that a life which seemed attractive to herself could not be so painful to her sister, and the probability that Violante's feeling for her lover had not gone beyond the region of sentimental fancy.

Rosa, being naturally of a sanguine temperament, inclined to the latter opinion, and rose up smiling as her father came in.

‘Well, and where is Violante—has she practised yet?’ demanded Signor Mattei.

‘No, father; she was too tired, she will come directly and sing for as long as you like.’

‘The child is possessed,’ muttered Signor Mattei.

‘Now, father,’ said Rosa, in a tone rather too decided to be quite filial, ‘you must leave Violante to me. I will manage her, and take care that she sings her best on Tuesday. But if she is scolded and frightened, she will break down. I know she will.’

‘Well, *figlia mia*,’ said Signor Mattei, somewhat meekly, for Rosa was the domestic authority, and was at that moment chopping up an excellent salad for him, and pouring on abundance of oil with her own hands. ‘But it is hard that my daughter should be such a little fool.’

‘So it is,’ said Rosa laughing, ‘but she will be good now. Now then, *Violante*,’ opening the bedroom door.

There lay *Violante*, her sweet round lips smiling, her soft eyes serene, her own fears and Rosa’s warnings driven into the background by the excitement of her confession, and by the thought of how Hugh had thanked her for her song.

She threw her arms round Rosa with a hearty, girlish embrace, quite different from the despairing clinging of an hour before.

‘Yes, I am coming. My hair? Oh,

father likes it so,' brushing it out into its native ripples. 'There, my red ribbon. Now I will be buona—buonissima figlia.'

And she ran into the sitting room and up to her father, pausing with a full, sweeping curtsey.

'Grazie—mille grazie—signore e signori,' she said. 'Is that right, padre mio?'

And her father, seeing her with her floating hair, her eyes and cheeks bright with the excitement that was making her heart beat like a bird in its cage, might well exclaim—

'Child, you might bring the house down if you would. Come and kiss me, and go and sing "Batti batti," before you have your supper.'

CHAPTER V.

IL DON GIOVANNI.

Oh, the lute,
 For that wondrous song were mute,
 And the bird would do her part,
 Falter, fail and break her heart—
 Break her heart and furl her wings,
 On the inexpressive strings.

‘ MY DEAREST HUGH,

‘ I write at once to tell you our good news. The class lists are out, and Arthur has got a second. I am sure he deserves it, for he has worked splendidly, and I always thought he would do well. I hope his success will not alter

his wishes with regard to the bank where your dear father so much wished to see him take a place ; but the life may seem rather hum-drum, and Arthur is naturally much flattered at all the things that have been said to him at Oxford. The girls are delighted. I am so glad you are enjoying yourself, but how much time you have spent at Civita Bella ! When do you think of returning ? I am going to give some parties as a sort of introduction for Mysie. The Clintons are coming. I don't know if *you* admire Katie Clinton ; she is a *very* nice girl, and she is thought a beauty. That fence by the oak copse is in a sad state ; do you think James Jennings ought to mend it ? We have a very good hay crop. I have had a rapturous letter from Jem, but you say less about your delights. I wish you would choose a present for me for each of the girls from Italy, and I should like to give Arthur something on his

success, but I dare say he would rather choose some books for himself.

‘Ever my dearest boy,

‘Your loving mother,

‘L. SPENCER CRICHTON.’

Redhurst House, Oxley.

This letter was brought to Hugh Crichton as he was dressing for the performance of ‘Don Giovanni,’ at which ‘Mademoiselle Mattei’ was to make her first appearance before the public of Civita Bella. The Tollemaches were full of interest in her success; and Hugh and James had selected the bouquets which were to be thrown to her, with both the ladies to help them, and Hugh’s choice of white and scented flowers was declared by Emily to be remarkably appropriate to Violante.

The pleasant commonplace letter came like a breath of fresh, sharp wind from

Oxley into the midst of the soft Italian air, good in itself, may be, but incongruous. Arthur's success? Hugh was gratified; but not immoderately so, and it crossed his mind to think 'What a fuss every one will make! But he shall have his way about the bank; it is not fair to tie any one down to other men's wishes. Katie Clinton! If the mother only knew!' If his mother had only known how his heart beat and his face burnt with excitement at the crisis in one little foreign girl's life, if she knew how far Redhurst seemed away to him! If she knew that he had fallen entirely in love with Violante Mattei! Would she ever know? And Hugh, perhaps for the first time, saw that question and all it implied looming in the distance. Was it to be 'all for love and the world well lost?' Would the world be lost? What did he mean to do? Hugh knew quite well what he would have advised Jem to do under similar circumstances. It was a

foolish, unsuitable thing, likely to make every one unhappy, it—. ‘I must sing, but I am frightened, Signor Hugo.’ ‘Will she be so frightened to-night? She said she liked stephanotis. I wonder if they can see on the stage where a bouquet comes from! I have not seen her for days. We should all be at sixes and sevens. Well, there’s no time now for consideration; but this letter has given me a shake, and I’ll play neither with her nor myself,’ and Hugh took up his bouquet, and resolved for the moment to do the one thing possible to him—look at and think of Violante.

The house was full, but the Tollemaches had taken care to secure good places. Emily was full of excitement, proud of having a private interest in the public singer, and eagerly wondering how Violante felt then. Jem discoursed to her on the various great stars whom he had seen fulfilling Zerlina’s part, nothing loth to show his acquaintance

with little scraps of their history, and with some of the technicalities of their profession, for Jem was great in private and semi-public theatricals and concerts, and was much amused and interested by what he had seen and heard of Mademoiselle Mattei.

Hugh sat leaning forward on the front of the box, and during the two first scenes he kept his eyes fixed on the stage as if he had never seen an opera before, and though he was not continuously attending, he never all his life long heard a note of the music without recalling that little Italian opera house, with its dim lights and imperfect scenery, its true sweet singers, and the throb of excitement and expectation as the third scene in which Zerlina makes her first appearance opened.

‘There she is!’ cried Emily, and there was nothing more in the theatre for Hugh but one little terrified face. Ah, so terrified, so white, he knew, under all its rouge, with

eyes that saw nothing and looked through the carefully practised smiles as if longing and appealing for the help no one could give her. Hugh felt a wild desire to jump down and snatch her in his arms, stop the music, drive away all those fantastic figures—anything, rather than that she should suffer such fear. What right had anyone to applaud her, to look at her—ah! she was going to sing!

She sang; and after a few faint notes the exquisite quality of her voice asserted itself, and, with her look of extreme youth and shyness, excited an interest that made the audience lenient to the stiffness of her gestures and the gravity and formality of what should have been coquettish dalliance between the peasant and the noble lover.

The notes were true and pure as those of a bird; but in their beautiful inflexions was no human passion, no varieties of meaning. Her face was lovely; but it did not image

Zerlina's affectionateness, vanity, triumph, and hesitation, her mischievous delight in the new admirer, and her lingering concern for the old one ; it spoke nothing to the audience, and to Hugh only Violante's fear and pain. But the music was perfect, and Violante, with her gay dress and mournful eyes, was a sweet sight to look on ; so she was well received enough, and Hugh, as he saw her mouth quiver, thought that the noisy plaudits would make her cry.

‘ Oh, doesn't she look just as sweet as ever ? ’ cried Emily.

‘ She looks just the same as ever ; she has no notion of her part,’ said Mr. Tollemache, ‘ but the voice is first-rate.’

‘ She would be a study for a picture, “ The Unwilling Actress,” ’ said Jem. ‘ What say you, Hugh ? ’

‘ Oh ; it is a great success—it is very good,’ said Hugh vaguely ; but his face was crimson, and he felt as if he could scarcely breathe.

The piece went on, and when the famous songs were heard in those perfect tones, when it was only necessary for her to stand and sing instead of to act, her voice and her youth and her beauty gained the day, there was a storm of applause, and a shower of bouquets fell at her feet. Hugh flung his white one, and Don Giovanni took it up and put it in her hand. Then suddenly the eyes lit up, the face was radiant, and the real passion which she had no power to assume or to mimic seemed to change her being.

‘ By Jove, she *is* lovely ! ’ cried Jem. The next moment she had hidden her face in the flowers, and her next notes were so faltering that they were hardly heard. Hugh felt a fury of impatience as the public interest turned to the other heroines of the piece, and yet he had time to watch Violante as she stood motionless and weary, forgetting the bye-play that should have kept her in view while she remained silent. Hugh did

not think that she saw him ; he could not catch her eye, and felt angrily jealous of the stage lovers.

‘ Now’s the trial,’ said Mr. Tollemache. ‘ Let us see how she will make a fool of Masetto.’ Masetto was a fine actor as well as a good singer, and the part of Don Giovanni was played by Signor Vasari, the manager of the company himself. Even Hugh, preoccupied as he was, could not but perceive that Zerlina gave them few chances of making a point.

‘ I feel just as if it was Violante herself who was unhappy,’ said Emily. ‘ She looks as if Signor Mattei had been scolding her.’

Hugh, at any rate, felt as if it were Violante whom Don Giovanni was persecuting, and was utterly carried away by the excitement of the scene, till, just as the wild dance came to a climax, and Zerlina’s screams for help were heard, his brother

touched his arm. Hugh started, and came suddenly to himself. James was gazing decorously at the stage. Hugh was conscious of having been so entirely absorbed as not to know how he might have betrayed his excitement. Of course he was in a rage with Jem for noticing it, but he sat back in his place and became aware that his hand trembled as he tried to put up his opera glasses, and that he had been biting his lip hard. He saw very little of the concluding scenes, and could not have told afterwards whether Don Giovanni died repentant or met the reward of his deeds. Even when the curtain dropped and Mademoiselle Mattei was led forward, to receive perhaps more bouquets and more 'bravas' than she deserved, he felt a dull cold sense of disenchantment, though he clapped and shouted with the rest.

'It is all very well,' said Mr. Tollemache, as he cloaked his mother; 'her extreme

youth and her voice attract for the present, but she is too bad an actress for permanent success.'

'She hasn't the physical strength for it,' said Jem; 'her voice will go.'

'It is to be hoped Vasari will marry her,' said Mr. Tollemache.

'It is a very pretty opera,' said Hugh; 'and I thought Donna Elvira had a fine voice.'

'The theatre was very hot,' said Mr. Tollemache, when they reached home; 'has it made your head ache, Mr. Crichton?'

'No, thank you, but I'll go to bed, I think. I don't care for a smoke, Jem, to-night.'

'Jem,' said Mr. Tollemache, as they parted after a desultory discussion of Violante, the opera, the Matteis, and the chances of Violante's voice being profitable to Signor Vasari, 'if you and Hugh care to go on and

see a bit more of Italy, to push on to Rome, for instance, for the few days you have left, you mustn't stand on ceremony with me.'

'Thank you,' said James. 'I'll see what Hugh says; I should like to see the—the Vatican, immensely.'

CHAPTER VI.

BROTHERLY COUNSEL.

‘ They were dangerous guides, the feelings—’

JAMES CRICHTON had a certain taste for peculiarity, and anything unexpected and eccentric attracted him as much as it repels many other people. He piqued himself on his liberality, and had friends and acquaintances in many grades of society, to whom he behaved with perfectly genuine freedom and equality. He also loved everything that the word ‘ Bohemian ’ implies to those classes who use it entirely *ab extra*. His mother’s vision of Jem’s daily life was a confused mixture of shabby velveteen, ale in queer

mugs, colours which she was told to admire but thought hideous, mingled with musical instruments of all descriptions. He teased her to ask the Oxley photographer to dinner, and perpetually shocked her by revealing the social standing of acquaintances, whom he spoke of in terms of the greatest enthusiasm, till her dread was that he would marry some of 'the sweet girls and perfect ladies' who supported their families by their own exertions in ways, which, though doubtless genteel, were not exactly aristocratic. She would have expected him to fall a victim to Violante at once.

But people do not always act in the way that is expected of them, and Mrs. Crichton would have been saved much uneasiness had she known that Jem's affections, so far as they were developed, were placed on the daughter of an Archdeacon, who dressed at once fashionably and quietly, did her hair in accordance with custom and not art, was such

a lady that no one ever called her lady-like, and so exactly what she ought to have been that no one would have ventured to say she was dull. Jem had a great many flirtations, but if ever a vision of the wife that years hence might reward his devotion to his work at the Foreign Office, crossed his mind that vision bore the form of Miss Helen Hayward. It takes a great deal of theory and very strong opinions to contend in practice with the instincts to which people are born; but instincts have less chance where feeling and passion rise up to do battle with them.

James looked into Hugh's dazzled absent eyes as they stood at his room door on their return from the opera, and felt that it was a bad moment for trying to bring him to reason; but the awkwardness of taking his elder brother to task in cold blood on the following morning made him seek for a con-

versation at once. So he followed him into his room and began :—

‘Did you hear what Tollemache said about going to Rome?’

‘Rome? No; do you want to go there?’

‘Why, yes! Of course. Who doesn’t?’

‘I don’t,’ said Hugh quietly.

‘No; but isn’t it a pity to miss the opportunity? In short, Hugh,—I say,—you know, aren’t you coming it rather strong in that quarter?’ said Jem, who was so astonished at the novel position in which he found himself that he plunged into his task of Mentor at once. ‘In short, suppose it was Arthur, you know, what should you say?’

‘I should say exactly what you want to say to me,’ said Hugh, and made a little pause. ‘If I do this thing,’ he went on, looking straight before him, ‘it will, I know, cause a great deal of vexation for the moment.’

‘It’s not that; but it could not possibly answer, Hugh, you can’t be such a fool. Go away and take time to reflect; no one is more reasonable than you.’

Hugh roused himself as if with an effort, and, sitting down on the edge of his bed, looked up at his brother and prepared for the contest. ‘I will tell you all you are going to say,’ he said. ‘This young lady—for she *is* a lady, Jem, and the daughter of a lady—is half a foreigner; she is only seventeen, she has no money, she has hardly any education, she has sung in public, on compulsion, and much against her will. If I marry her—’

‘You will break mamma’s heart,’ said Jem, going back in his vexation to his childish mode of speech.

‘No, I shall not. She won’t like it, of course, but she’ll come round to it. Of course some women would not, but she would never make the worst of a thing.

There's an end of her plans for me, what else is there to matter ? '

'No one would visit her,' muttered Jem, who had often inveighed at the folly of social prejudice.

'Oh, yes, they would, if my mother received her. It would be a bad match, of course, but not so bad as that when all the circumstances were explained.'

'You seem to have considered it all.'

'Did you suppose I should do it without considering? I'm not the man, James, not to see all these difficulties; I am not going to take a leap in the dark.'

'It's just as bad if you leap over a precipice in the light !'

Hugh was silent. It was perhaps owing to his clear sense of what was due to everyone, and to his power of seeing both sides of a question, that he was not offended by his brother's displeasure. What else could James say? He himself, as he had told

him, could say it all, had said it, did say it still. And what could he answer? That, though a broken heart was a form of speech, his would in future be a broken life without Violante was a statement that he could not bring himself to make, and which James would not have believed. 'Of course I can give her up,' he thought; 'but if I do shall I ever live my life whole and perfect again? Is it not in me to be to her what I never have been, never could be, to anyone else?'

Hugh was a self-conscious person, as well as a conscientious one; he was not very young, and thus it will be perceived that he knew well what he was about. He was enough himself to wonder at himself; but in these sweet holiday weeks something had possessed him beyond his own control. He could fly from it, but he could not conquer it.

'Well,' he said, as James continued his arguments, 'grant that I should forget her,

what should I be worth then? how much of myself should I have lost!’

‘Anyone might say that about any temptation of the sort,’ said Jem.

‘And truly. But—“halt or maimed,” you know, Jem. There are times when we must pay the price. You can’t say this is a case in point.’

‘But how about the girl?’ said Jem. ‘Have you involved yourself with her?’

‘No,’ said Hugh, and then added: ‘Not intentionally.’

‘Ah!’ said Jem, with a whistle. He was surprised to perceive that the argument of Violante’s probable disappointment had not been the first to be put forward by Hugh. His brother had argued out the question of right and wrong for himself first, though now he eagerly took up this point.

‘I think she *does* like me,’ he said, in a much more lover-like manner; ‘and her father tyrannises over her, poor child: she

hates her profession ; she would never want to hear of it again.'

'Well, and how did it all come about?'

To this question James did not obtain a direct answer ; but after about half-an-hour of explanation, description, and rapture, he said :

'Well, Hugh, you *are* in for it, and no mistake. I'm sorry for you. And, pray, what do you intend to do?'

'I wish to act as considerately as possible to everyone,' said Hugh. 'I shall go home and tell my mother myself—'

'Without engaging yourself to Violante?'

'I shall do nothing in a hurry ; but you cannot suppose that it needs spoken words to bind me now.'

'But I say,' said James suddenly, 'did not some one say she was engaged to the manager?'

'That is not true,' said Hugh, colouring up ; 'she cannot endure him.'

‘Oh!’ said James, dryly. ‘All things considered, I wonder you did not speak before to-night.’

‘I should not have expected *you* to take that view,’ returned his brother.

‘Well, she’s none the worse for it, of course; but, still, when it comes to one’s wife, you see, Hugh, there are advantages in plain sailing.’

‘Look here, James,’ cried Hugh, starting up, ‘we have talked long enough; I’ll take care of my mother, but I love Violante, and I believe she loves me, and our lives shall not be spoilt for anyone’s scruples. Do you suppose *I* don’t know my own mind? do you think *I* should act in a hurry, and repent of it afterwards? I would give her up now if I thought it right. It might be right in some cases, but this stands apart from ordinary rules—’

‘I *think* I’ve heard that remark before,’ James could not resist interposing.

‘Very likely. In my case it is true. Not answer? It *shall* answer! Do you think I shall ever be afraid of the consequences of my actions?’

Hugh had the advantage of definite purpose and strong feeling. He spoke low, but his whole face lighted up as he, usually scrupulously self-distrustful in his speech, uttered this mighty boast. James, fluent and enthusiastic as he was, had for the moment nothing to say. He meant well; but his objections were vague and inconsistent with much of his own conduct. Hugh had the better of him, and reduced him to looking dissatisfied and cross.

‘Well, if you will make a fool of yourself,’ he muttered, ‘I’ll say good night.’

‘Good night!’ said Hugh, coming out of the clouds. ‘You were quite right to say your say, Jem.’

James was a very good-tempered person,

but this was a little more than he could stand.

‘Some day you may wish you had listened to it,’ he said. ‘If you had seen as much of girls as I have, you would know there was nothing extraordinary in being extra silly and sentimental. Good heavens! I might have been married a dozen times over if I’d been so heroic over every little flirtation.’

Not being a woman, Hugh left the last word to his brother. He had no particular respect for Jem’s opinion, and did not care at all whether he approved of his choice or not. He believed that he could make his mother content with it; and his mother’s contentment would silence all active opposition of the outer world. His boy and girl cousins had no right to a remark: he supposed he could put up with Arthur’s nonsense. Here he took the flower out of his

coat, and thought that the scent of stephanotis would always remind him of Violante. And then he went and leaned out of his window in the soft starlit southern night, and wondered if Violante was dreaming of her success or of him.

How strange it was that to him, of all people, should have come this wonderful and poetical experience ! Hugh was not aware that the beauty of the scene, the clearness of the sky, the delicate shadowy spires and pinnacles that stood out soft and clear against it, the light of the stars, the breath of the south, in any way influenced him ; he would have laughed even then at a description of a lover looking at the stars and thinking of his lady. It never occurred to him to call to mind any song or poem that put into words such common-place romance. For the place, the circumstances, Violante herself, the flower in his hand, the

notes yet ringing in his ears, appealed to a simplicity of sentiment any school-girl might have shared with him. Yet real honest feeling might give for once reality to these hackneyed images, just as it could as easily have dispensed with them altogether.

CHAPTER VII.

WHITE FLOWERS.

‘ True love
Lives among the false loves, knowing
Just their peace and strife ;
Bears the self-same look, but always
Has an inner life.

.
Tell me, then, do you dare offer
This true love to me ?
Neither you nor I can answer :
We must—wait and see !’

THE fearful ordeal was over ; the first night had come and gone, and the earth had not opened to swallow Violante up ; the disgraceful tears had been successfully controlled ; and through all the fear and confusion, the dread of the audience and of her fellow-

actors, the physical discomfort of the noise and the heat, had penetrated a little thrill of pleasure; and for one moment, when all the 'Bravas' seemed to ring with Hugh's voice, and his sweet white bouquet fell at her feet, the excitement was not all pain. But, painful or joyful, it was far too intense for so delicate a creature to bear; and tears, sleeplessness, and excessive exhaustion, were its natural result. Both Rosa and her father were so much relieved that no break-down had taken place that, though both were fully capable of criticising her performance, they rejoiced as if it had been an absolute success; and even the tender sister could not believe but that the pleasure must have predominated over the pain. So poor Violante dried her tears as fast as she could, conscious of being too silly a child even for Rosa's sympathy, and not daring to say that the worst terror of all was Signor Vasari's commendation. She had no need to suffer from

Masetto's, who declared with indignation that it was impossible to execute scenes of passion and sentiment with so irresponsible a soprano. On the Wednesday another opera was to be given; on the Thursday 'Don Giovanni' would be repeated, and then there loomed before Violante the dreadful impossible archness of the playful heroine of 'Il Barbiere.' Surely, when she came back from the rehearsal on Wednesday, some one would come to hear how she had fared! There was no one. Even Emily Tollemache neither came nor wrote. So he only wanted to throw bouquets at her!

'Oh, I hate the flowers! I hate their very smell,' sobbed poor Violante to herself; but she did not throw them away; and when, on Thursday night, as the opera proceeded, no white bouquet fell, her spirit died utterly within her, and then rose in passionate despair. She could not bear her troubles—this poor child—for one day; but,

weak and soft as she was, it was no mere tender sentiment that gave her face a sort of power and thrilled her voice with a new energy.

When the curtain rose on the performers after the opera was over, a great white bridal-looking bouquet fell at Violante's feet. Don Giovanni, impelled perhaps by various jealousies of the favour shown to the little débutante, picked it up and gave it to Donna Elvira, who graciously curtseyed thanks. Zerlina started; she could see no one; and the curtain fell.

‘Mademoiselle, I think those are my flowers.’

Donna Elvira burst out laughing and pointed the bouquet scornfully at Zerlina.

‘Eccola—Brava, brava! Mademoiselle learns quickly. She wants other ladies’ bouquets, not content with her own!’

‘Mademoiselle’s thoughts are elsewhere than on the stage,’ sneered Masetto.

‘Ah—it is a love token! Is it il Signor Inglese? Ah, ha, ha!’

Violante, in an agony of shame at her own folly, with burning cheeks and beating heart, shrank away without a word; but when she reached home and could hide her face on Rosa’s shoulder, her first words were—

‘Oh, my flowers, my flowers!’ and when Rosa understood the story she could give no adequate consolation.

‘Oh, child—child!’ she cried at last, ‘do not sob and cry in this way. Who ever cured their troubles so? Now I will not have it. Perhaps he did not throw the flowers after all! Lie down and go to sleep.’

Violante endeavoured to obey; she put the damp tumbled hair off her face, and lay down and closed her eyes. ‘But he did throw them,’ she thought to herself; but she did not say so to Rosa, for her sorrow was

beginning to give the child a stand-point of her own.

Hugh, meanwhile, was the victim of circumstances. Mrs. Tollemache had planned an excursion, which carried them off early on the morning after the first opera, and from which they did not return till late in the evening of the second day. Hugh was annoyed; but he knew that he should have other opportunities of seeing Violante, and he could not escape without more commotion than was expedient. So he went and enjoyed himself all the more, because the excitement of his whole nature made him more than usually open to enjoyment. Hugh had never thought scenery so beautiful or sights so interesting; he was ready to be amused by every trifling incident of their trip. *He* knew that Violante would be there when he came back; while *she*, poor child, knew nothing. But he managed to look in at the end of the opera and throw

his bouquet; and on the next day he thought no one could have objected to his making a visit of enquiry, particularly as most likely Violante would not be at home. James's remarks had not been without their effect, in so far as they increased his desire to act with the greatest possible tact and caution; and he much wished to secure his mother's consent, certainly before any public disturbance took place, and even, if possible, before actually engaging himself to Violante, and this for her sake. He had no dreams of hiding himself from the world with her: he could do no other than follow his profession, and live with his wife in the midst of his friends. In short, Hugh wished to eat his cake and have it—to do a wild, foolish, utterly romantic thing, and yet sacrifice no conventional or real advantage. And he had quite sense enough to know that conventional advantages *were* real in this case, and quite confidence enough in himself to believe that,

he, in his wisdom, could succeed in doing what most other men had failed in attempting.

‘There shall be no secrecy and no quarrelling,’ he thought; ‘and yet I will judge for myself.’

However, this evening, politeness would have prompted a call on Signor Mattei had Violante never existed; and as Jem had promised to take some drive with the Tollemaches it was not worth while to ask for his company; so he asked if Signor Mattei was at home. ‘No—il signor was out.’ ‘La signorina Rosa?’ ‘Out too, she was giving a lesson—ah, it was only English people who went out in such a sun. What a pity! Even Mademoiselle Mattei (Maddalena proudly gave Violante the French title by which she was known to the public) was not there; she was tired with the rehearsals; she was lying down. Would il signor wait? They would be in soon.’ Hugh thought

that he would wait. This was not the first time that he had seen Maddalena.

Hugh came into the great shady room, where the Venetian blinds were down and the light was green and cool. Only one window was open—a little one at the end facing east—and on its ledge stood a great bowl of flaming flowers, the blue sky and a distant marble pinnacle, fretted and pierced, behind them ; a girl in an old white dress on the low cushioned bench beneath—Violante's delicate face and floating hair clear against the sky. There were red flowers and blue flowers in the great china bowl, but white ones in Violante's little hands ; and as Hugh's foot fell on the old scratched inlaid work of the floor she held them to her lips. Then the foot-fall sounded, and she turned her head and sprang up with such a start that down fell flowers, red, white, and blue, with the china bowl in one common ruin. In another moment Hugh and Violante, both

laughing and exclaiming, were picking them up, and Hugh was pursuing the bowl as it rolled along the polished floor.

‘No harm done,’ he said, as he brought it back, ‘it is not broken.’

‘Oh, I am so glad ! Father is so fond of it. Oh, how wet the cushion is !’

‘Hang it out of window,’ said Hugh, as he pulled it off the seat. ‘I don’t want it. And there,’ taking it from the chair, ‘is another one for you.’

And Hugh sat down on the vacant half of the window-seat ; and, replacing the bowl on the ledge, began to arrange the wet flowers in it. Violante sat down also ; and, shaking the drops from the roses and oleanders, held them to him one by one.

She felt quite happy ; past and future had floated away from her. She did not think of saying anything ; the flowers were enough.

'I don't think I understand much about arranging flowers,' said Hugh.

'They were dying, or I should not have taken them to pieces,' said she, with a glance at the white bouquet.

'You had a *white* bouquet?'

'Oh—I had so many—this beautiful one—all roses,' said Violante, trying, in her heightened spirits, this elementary piece of coquetting.

'Too many to count?'

'Oh, yes—quite too many. There were three red ones and this—all colours—and *one* white.'

She looked at Hugh, seized with a sudden fear. Perhaps he had not thrown the white one, after all!

'Your trophies, Mademoiselle Mattei. Were you very proud of them as you were counting the spoils?' said the equally foolish Hugh, as he thought: 'Of course, she *does* care for it, after all.'

Violante blushed intensely and her lips quivered.

‘I like the *flowers*,’ she said.

‘And the applause?’ said Hugh, jealously.

‘Don’t you know you had a great triumph? We shall all boast of your acquaintance.’

Violante bent her head low, her lashes heavy and wet.

‘Still, you don’t like it,’ cried Hugh; and suddenly the tones were tender. ‘Does it still frighten you so much, Violante?’

‘Oh yes—so much!’

‘Ah, I saw you were frightened. It was Violante, not Zerlina, that I was looking at.’

‘Yes, that’s the worst of it.’

‘The worst of it?’

‘I never act enough, they say. I can only sing.’

‘Well, what more would anyone have? You sing like an angel. And Violante is

much better worth looking at than Zerlina, any day.'

'Ah,' said Violante, more brightly, 'but you would not think so if you were Signor Rubini.'

'What—Masetto—shouldn't I?'

'He said,' continued Violante, with penitence, 'that he would rather act with a wax-doll, and—and that I show off my own voice and do not think of his. But I cannot help it, indeed.'

'What an insolent scoundrel! You shall—why do you ever act with him again?'

'Oh, but it is a great honour! I ought to please him if I could. But I don't know how.'

The sorrowful, contrite tones, and the droop of her lip were almost more than Hugh could bear. James had told him that it would be cruel to make this poor little child unhappy by the uncertainties of an

engagement that could not be immediately fulfilled. Would she be any happier if he left her to cry over her bad acting, and to be criticized by Italian singers? He was coming to a resolution, but for a moment he held it back.

‘Give yourself airs,’ he said. ‘Say you’ll never sing again if they find fault with you! See what they will say then.’

‘I?’ said Violante, opening round eyes of amazement. ‘How could I?’

‘Ah,’ said Hugh, with growing excitement, ‘but one of these days you will say, “*I will not act with Signor Rubini!*” We are going home, you know, when I come back——’

He paused, and Violante turned cold and sick, as when the eyes of the whole theatre were fixed upon her. He was going away! Hugh started up and walked away from her for a moment; then he came back and stood before her, and spoke.

‘No, you cannot say that. I will tell you what to say. Say you have promised to be my wife, my darling ; and it does not matter if you act well or ill. Listen to me one moment. Signorina, I love you ; though I cannot tell you so in persuasive words. If you will trust me for a little while, I will come back and bring my mother, who will welcome you and love you. Can you care for me, Violante ?’

Hugh, scrupulous and self-conscious, wasted many words. He had said within himself that he would show more deference to Violante than he would have thought necessary to a princess ; that with his first words he would make it plain, both that there were difficulties, and that he would overcome them. There was a suppressed fire in the eyes generally so quiet, and a sort of courtliness in the manners that were sometimes so stiff, a deference that would

soon be tender, an earnestness just held back from passionate force.

Violante heard but three words: 'I love you.' Shy as she was, she was utterly trustful, and was too innocent and too fervent for any pretence of coyness.

'Do you love me, Violante?'

'Oh, yes!' and she let him take her in his arms, while her tears fell with the soft relief of having found a comforter. She was won, this little southern Juliet, won—ah, how easily!—and Hugh vowed to himself that he would justify her innocent trust, and give her all she knew not how to demand.

'You are not frightened now, my child?'

'Oh, no!'

'Let me look and see;' and, as Hugh drew away the veiling fingers, she did not shrink from the kiss that came in their stead.

'What will father say?' murmured she presently.

Now, it would have suited Hugh better could he have left Signor Mattei in ignorance until he had settled the affair with his own people; but he was too generous to involve Violante in the toils of a secret. Never should she be tempted by him to one doubtful action. So he answered—

‘That I will soon find out; and to do so, my darling, I must go.’

And so, with many tender words, and with a wonderful delight in his own love as well as in the sweet child who had awakened it, Hugh took his leave for the present; and she, who was conscious of no delight but in him, watched him for a moment, then came and turned the old lock of the door, which he suddenly found so perplexing; so that, as he went away, he saw her standing in the dim, lofty corridor, with the sunlight shining halo-wise behind her hair, and the still brighter aureole of his passionate fancy glorifying her innocent face.

PART II.

CONTRASTS.

‘ There’s none so sure to pay his debt,
As wet to dry, and dry to wet.’

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TIME OF ROSES.

‘When all the world was young, lad,
And all the trees were green.’

WHILE the bright southern sunshine was filling the old palace with its rays; and while, beneath the blue Italian sky, Hugh Crichton was arranging Violante’s flowers; the same fair summer weather was making life enchanting in the English county where Oxley lay. Instead of deep, unbroken azure, see a paler tint, with fleecy, snowy clouds; and, for the fretwork and the imagery, the marble, and the alabaster of Civita Bella, broad, green, low-lying meadows, where

dog-roses tossed in the hedges, and dog-daisies and buttercups were falling beneath the scythe ; a slow, sleepy canal, with here and there a bright-painted boat ; and, on the low hill side, the clustering white villas and modern streets, surmounted, not by innumerable pinnacles and domes, but by one tall, grey spire.

Oxley was a large, flourishing town, some forty miles from London—next to the county town in dignity, and before it in size and enterprise. It could boast no architecture and no antiquities, save a handsome church—neither very old nor very new—and some tumble-down, red-tiled, dirty streets, sloping down from the back of the town to the canal — unless, indeed, like some of its townsmen, you counted the Corinthian façade of the railway station, the Gothic gables of the new Town Hall, or the sober eighteenth-century squareness of the Oxley Bank. These two latter public buildings opened on

to a broad, sunny market-place ; from which started a clean, white, sunny road, which led past villas, nursery gardens, meadows, and bits of furzy, heathery waste, all the way to Redhurst, and was the old coach-road from the county town to London.

Along this road were the prettiest residences, the gayest little conservatories, the most flowery lilacs, laburnums, and acacias of suburban Oxley. Here was the ‘best neighbourhood,’ and here, on the clean, gravelled footway, the nursery-maids and children went to walk on fine mornings ; ladies and little dogs paid calls of an afternoon ; and groups of slim, long-haired girls came out to attend classes at Oxley Manor, the famous Young Ladies’ School. The Manor House lay back from the road behind high, substantial, red brick walls, with mossy crevices, and bushy ivy peeping over the top ; showing beyond, garden trees, walnuts, acacias, and horse-chesnuts, sur-

rounding the big, substantial house, where, from the small-paned windows, peeped now and then a girl's face.

There was no better school in the country than the Miss Vennings' at Oxley Manor; and it was considered a great privilege for the girls of Oxley that certain classes there were opened to them; and a still greater that Miss Spencer and Miss Crofton were allowed to attend regularly as day scholars. But these young ladies did not come from Redhurst by the road. There was a pretty, quiet path through the meadows—half way between the public road and the towing path by the canal—that led here through a bit of copsewood famous for primroses, there across a sunny, open meadow; now over a low, wooden stile, then between high hedges, full of brambles, honey-suckles, and roses; till the hedges grew neater and closer, and terminated in the high red wall of the Manor kitchen-garden, from which opened

a little green gate. On the other side of the road was a paddock, with a shallow pond where ducks flourished, and where, on the opposite bank, an old pollard willow threw its slender branches across the muddy water.

On that sunny afternoon a sunnier spot could hardly have been found than the narrow path under the wall ; and yet here lingered two figures : a girl, who had poised herself on the end of a great garden-roller, and a young man who leaned against the white railing of the pond beside her. She was a graceful little lady, small and soft-faced ; with brown hair, shining and neat, round rosy lips, and clear, steady eyes of a hazel tint. Her white dress was elaborately trimmed with handsome embroidery, and all her blue ribbons were fresh and smart, as if they had no need to see sunny days enough to dim their brightness. There was a bag of books at her feet, and her pretty eyes were cast down towards them ; and her pink

cheeks were flushed with considerable, yet not excessive, embarrassment.

‘But, Arthur,’ she said, with a clear, distinct, and yet soft utterance, ‘but, Arthur, I think we ought to consider about it a great deal.’

‘I have never considered it at all,’ said Arthur Spencer.

He was a tall young man, slight and graceful; with—spite of his second class and his cultivated expression—a sort of happy-go-lucky air, that seemed hardly to have outgrown the right to his old appellation of a ‘very pretty boy,’ earned by his bright colour, dark hair, with a picturesque wave in it, and black-lashed eyes, of that distinct shade of grey which cannot be mistaken for blue or hazel. He was an elegant, rather handsome young man at three-and-twenty, with a light-hearted, self-reliant manner that might have been careless and even conceited had a less earnest and genuine affection

looked out from his bright eyes at the pretty creature beside him. Arthur thought himself clever, good-looking, rather a fine fellow in his way ; but what did he not think of Mysie Crofton ?

‘ There’s nothing *new* in it ; is there, Mysie ? ’ he continued, as he took her prettily-gloved hand, with the freedom of old intercourse, just touched with something sweeter. ‘ Nothing new. We were always the friends of the family, and it *must* have come to this soon. ’

‘ Yes, ’ said Mysie, simply ; ‘ but I thought—I thought—those things never *did* come to anything. ’

‘ You thought ? Ah, Mysie, I have my answer now : You thought, you little worldly-minded thing, that first love was all humbug, eh ? Well, we’ll be an instance to the contrary. ’

Mysie blushed.

‘I’m sure,’ she said, ‘you were always telling me about young ladies.’

‘But I always told you about them, Mysie! And now I could not go on any longer without having it out. *I* knew it; and *you* knew it—oh, yes, you did; and Aunt Lily was beginning to find out.’

‘But there’s Hugh?’

‘Ah, Hugh. I daresay he won’t quite like it; those things are not in his line. But he is too good to make foolish objections. To be sure, there is one he may fairly make.’

‘What’s that?’ said Mysie, frightened.

‘Your fortune, Mysie; and when I think of it, it half frightens me.’

‘I don’t think it is so very much,’ said Mysie.

‘It is enough to give you a right to all this,’ said Arthur, touching her pretty dress; ‘and if I thought I could not give it you, I would be silent. But, Mysie, I have not

much of my own ; but I think I have earned the right to say I have a good chance of success in any career I might choose ; and there is always the Bank. I know I cannot marry you now, Mysie, my darling,' he continued, with a sort of frank, eager deference ; 'and if anyone you like better comes by I will never hold you to your promise. But in the meantime are we the worse for acknowledging that which has existed so long—so long? Oh, Mysie, I don't know how to make love to you. I think it's all made, but you are part of myself. I could have no life without you. I cannot imagine myself *not* loving you, not looking to have you one day for my own.'

If Mysie was a little slow to answer, it was not because she could imagine her life without Arthur. All this was only the right name for that which had always been. They *were* Arthur and Mysie ; and they

would be Arthur and Mysie to the end of the chapter.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that’s quite true. It just is. But I’ll try and be a great deal better to you than ever I have been. It ought to be like “John Anderson.”’

Mysie had ideas, and was not afraid to express them. She used nice, pretty language, and when a thought struck her she would say it out in a way sometimes formal, but always genuine and sweet.

‘John Anderson?’ said Arthur—not that he did not know.

And Mysie repeated the sweetest of all sweet love-songs, the one fulfilment in the midst of so much longing desire.

As Arthur heard her gentle, fearless voice, and saw her clear eyes raised to his own, as she repeated, without fear or falter :

‘And sleep thegither at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo,’

a great awe came over him.

‘ Oh, Mysie, my love, my darling, may God grant it! For nothing in life could ever come between us.’

And with this hope, that in its intensity was almost fear, he drew her towards him, and gave her his first *lover's* kiss. She was silent ; and then, recovering herself, said, in a different tone :

‘ And I don't think it will be inconvenient to have a little money!’

The revulsion of ideas made Arthur laugh.

‘ Worldly wisdom!’ he exclaimed ; then suddenly sprang up from the other end of the roller as a tall handsome lady, in a garden hat, came out of the green gate.

‘ Miss Crofton!’

‘ I—I was only taking Mysie to school, Miss Venning,’ said Arthur ; while Mysie, pink and fluttered, picked up her books and hurried off up the path.

Miss Venning was a stately, blue-eyed

woman of forty or thereabouts; with a fair, fresh complexion, and a manner that twenty years of school-keeping had rendered somewhat condescending, as if the world consisted of pupils to be at once governed and encouraged; while her blue eyes had a certain look of enquiry in them, as if she was in the habit of passing judgment on those who came before her. But, that the judgment would be just and kind, the handsome face gave every promise; and, perhaps, the scales might even drop a little in favour of a kind of culprit that did not often come before her. Besides, if Arthur Spencer had brought the girls to school once within her recollection, he had done so fifty times.

‘But——’. Arthur did not give time for this awful monosyllable to frame itself into an objection.

‘Miss Venning,’ he said, persuasively, ‘I’m doing no harm. I daresay you have

often thought of it before; it couldn't be helped, you see, any longer.'

'Arthur,' said Miss Venning, in a deep, full voice, somewhat appalling to hear, 'if you had anything particular to say to Miss Crofton, you have ample opportunities without following her here.'

Arthur did not look much discomfited. Perhaps there was the slightest turn in the formidable voice that showed that the humour of the situation was not quite lost on the speaker.

He blushed, and then said, with a straightforwardness that few ladies would have resisted:

'Miss Venning, I want to have Mysie for my wife, if my aunt and Hugh will consent to our engagement. I don't know when we began to think of it, but I suppose to-day it—well—came to a head.'

'And what does Mysie say?' said Miss

Venning, still judicial, but interested. She considered Arthur Spencer a very promising young man.

‘ Mysie sees no objection, Miss Venning. I didn’t mean to take a liberty, I’m sure, with the sacred precincts of the Manor House ; but, since it has happened so, I do wish you would let me consult you.’

Whether this appeal was the result of a delicate tact, or of the overflowing happiness that longed for sympathy, it caused Miss Venning to walk along the path beside him, saying :

‘ Well ? ’

‘ Well,’ said Arthur, ‘ you see how it is with us ; and we have our lives before us, and there is time for me to make myself worthy of Mysie’s money—I’ll not say of herself,’ he added, with a little softening of his confident voice.

‘ Well ? ’ said Miss Venning again, with a yet deeper intonation.

‘ I have not hitherto made up my mind as to my profession,’ said Arthur. ‘ I hardly looked beyond the examination; but the Bank has always been my destination, and you know my uncle’s kindness marked out my career there long ago.’

‘ And haven’t you any further ambition?’ said Miss Venning, who thought young men ought to push themselves.

‘ Why,’ said Arthur, ‘ I don’t like teaching, in which career my degree would be of most use to me; and the bar is very slow work. Hugh really wants help; and, in short, Miss Venning, when life is so crowded and the world so over-full I think if a man has the good luck to have a line marked out for him he ought to stick to it, unless his tastes point very decidedly the other way. Besides, I like Oxley. And I think,’ he added, laughing and colouring, ‘ I should say this under *any* circumstances. But if not, one must take life as a whole, you know.’

Miss Venning thought Oxley Bank rather a flat ending to so creditable a career as Arthur's had been ; but then, on the other hand, it was eminently safe and respectable, and, with this early marriage, would effectually 'keep him out of mischief.'

'But what will your cousin say?' she asked.

'Why, I'm afraid he'll think it his duty to object a little. But Hugh is such a good fellow, and has always been so thoroughly kind to me, and is so fair in judgment, that I am sure he will own I have as good a right to try for the prize as anyone else. It's very odd that he has never looked out for himself. But, dear me! he would be so awfully particular!'

'Well, Arthur,' said Miss Venning, 'I approve of young men marrying. It's far more necessary for them than for girls.'

'One couldn't well manage it without a girl,' murmured Arthur.

‘So that,’ said Miss Venning, ‘it’s well young women have different opinions on the subject. Go home, and take the responsibility off my shoulders by telling your aunt at once.’

‘I’ll never do it in your garden again, Miss Venning,’ cried Arthur, as he left her with a very hearty shake of the hand.

Certainly life lay fair before and behind Arthur Spencer. He was clever, with the technical skill needed for the attainment of his scholastic honours more developed than the general power behind it. That is to say, all his brains—and they were good ones—had been given to the composition of Greek and Latin, and to the acquirement of the knowledge necessary to the attainment of a good degree. He was naturally active, and industrious; and ambition and conscience had both urged him to do well the work that nature had made easy to him. He had won plenty of praise, which he liked exceedingly ;

and plenty of popularity, which came so naturally that he was hardly conscious of it. But he had hitherto taken life outside the schools very much for granted; thought Hugh infallible on matters of business, and James an oracle in matters of art. Indeed, Arthur's power of appreciation was one of his best points. Unlike many of her sons, he loved and believed in Oxford—perhaps because he had given her his best and she had well repaid him; and, while there, his time and thoughts had been fully occupied with the work before him. At once affectionate and self-reliant, he took readily to the independence that circumstances indicated, and at a very early age took good care of himself. And, though there was no one in his boyhood to bestow on him exclusive affection, his warm heart gave out enough to all to make his kindly home a happy and sunny one. For Arthur liked most people. It had been said with some truth that one

person was much the same as another to him, he 'got on' so well with all. It would be praising the gay untried boy far too highly to say that he had a spirit of universal charity; but he did possess a sort of loving-kindness, a gift in whose soil the greatest of all graces might grow; an entire absence of depreciating ill-nature.

But Arthur himself had long known that for him the human race was divided into two parts—Mysie and other people.

CHAPTER IX.

OXLEY MANOR.

‘Oh, so many, many, many maidens !

UNDER the great walnut-tree on the lawn the three Miss Vennings were assembled in consultation. The Manor House possessed one of the most enchanting gardens that the past has ever handed down to the present. High walls shutting it in safe, on which grew jessamine and westeria and sweet old-fashioned roses ; a narrow path running round the lawn, and leading away into vistas of shrubbery ; while on the soft turf grew beautiful trees, and, in especial, an immense walnut. Miss Venning sat on a garden

bench communicating to her sisters the important event that had just electrified her maidenly precincts.

‘It *was* very inconsiderate of Arthur to select our garden-roller for the purpose,’ said Miss Clarissa, the second of the trio.

‘Why, Clarissa? You don’t suppose people settle the exact spot beforehand!’ said Miss Florence, the third.

Miss Florence, as she now aspired to be called, had been little Flossy not many years back; and the thick bright hair of fairest flaxen—‘Flossy’s tow,’ as her sisters called it—now twisted round her head, had not so very long ago hung down her back in all its native lustre. She was a tall girl of twenty, with a fine open face, handsome in form, and coloured with a pink—‘as pink as pink ribbon,’ Clarissa said—bright enough to allow for a little fading as the years went by; and her blue eyes were full of thought and energy. Young as she was, everyone knew

that she was a much greater power in the house than Miss Clarissa, and was hardly second to Miss Venning herself. All the girls obeyed her; she was full of life and force to the very tips of her strong, slender fingers; could learn better than the girls, teach better than the governesses, thought school-keeping a vocation and not a drudgery, and spent her half-holidays in the parish; was never ill, never tired, and never unhappy; and possessed such a store of spirits and energy that—to quote again from Clarissa—if Flossy was not marked out for misfortune Nature had wasted a great deal of good stuff in the making of her.

Flossy was Miss Venning's darling, and need never have corrected an exercise nor set a sum if she had not been so minded; but she had replied to the offer of freedom with scorn and contempt: 'Did sister think she should be happier for being idle?' and set to work with all her might and main to

‘enlarge the minds and improve the tone’ of her sister’s pupils, introducing new studies, new authors, and new ideas; talking over Miss Venning—or sometimes, perhaps, talking her down—with an equal amount of self-confidence and self-devotion.

In Miss Clarissa’s girlish days no such possibility of freedom had been offered to her. Nine or ten years ago, during the long illness of their mother, and while the brothers who filled up the wide gaps between the three sisters had been yet unsettled in life, the circumstances of the school had required more personal exertion; and when Clarissa was at the end of her teens she had been too busy—teaching all the English, that the resident governess might be French—to consider if it was desirable for the pupils to read Thackeray or to learn Latin and Euclid. Clarissa was a good girl and did her duty; but now, at eight and twenty, she felt as if life might have offered her some-

thing more than school-keeping. She told Flossy that she should like to marry a Duke and drink chocolate out of Sèvres china—and the scandalized Flossy perceived neither the twinkle of the sleepy blue eyes nor the wistful fall of the well-curved mouth, the delicate prettiness of which gave to the small curly-haired Clarissa a look of youth which neither the absence of Sèvres china nor the presence of young ladies had hitherto impaired. Flossy's eyes were always wide open and rarely twinkled, though they often laughed.

They brightened into a laugh now, as she repeated her remark—

‘You don't suppose, Clarissa, that people settle the exact spot beforehand!’

‘Really, Flossy, my experience is limited; but, as Mary says, as Arthur lives in the house with Mysie, I think he might have managed matters at home.’

‘Oh, but,’ said Flossy, ‘now he has sister on his side, you see.’

‘Yes, Mary ; you’re in the scrape,’ said Clarissa.

‘Really, my dear, I don’t see that at all. I am not responsible for Miss Crofton now, beyond her German and music lessons.’

‘I suppose she might do much better,’ said Clarissa.

‘She couldn’t do better,’ said Florence, decidedly, in her full rich voice. Will it quite detract from Flossy’s character for feminine softness if it be owned that she spoke rather loud ? ‘Arthur has very good prospects, and is the very nicest young man I know.’

‘Dear me ! Flossy,’ said Clarissa. ‘I thought you considered matrimony a mistake.’

‘By no means,’ emphatically returned Flossy ; ‘when everything is suitable and people are fond of each other. I don’t think I shall ever wish to marry anyone myself ; and how anyone can say life is

wanting in interest I can't conceive; but I should never be so absurd as to lay down general principles. That is where people fall into error. And besides,' she concluded heartily, 'anyone could see dear little Mysie was fond of Arthur, and I am so glad she will be happy!'

'Well, there are more words than hers and Arthur's to that,' said Clarissa.

'Mrs. Crichton never objects to anything,' said Flossy; 'and as for Mr. Crichton, surely he won't be so horrid.'

'Well, *I* could not help it,' said Miss Venning.

'No,' returned Flossy; 'and as Mysie is not exactly a girl it doesn't signify.'

Mysie was eighteen and a week; but Flossy used the term 'girl' in a strictly technical sense.

'Dear me!' she continued, 'my class will be waiting for me.' And as she ran into the house Miss Venning looked after her.

‘I think young men have very strange tastes,’ she said.

‘Because *Flossy* has no lovers?’ said Clarissa, with a slight emphasis.

‘Well, I am sure I do not want her to have any,’ returned Miss Venning, with a smile at her sisterly partiality.

‘Dear me, no, Mary! *Flossy* won’t be fit for a lover for five years at least. She has all the world to reform first!’

Miss Venning laughed as she went to tend her beautiful roses, and Clarissa, left alone, wandered on till she sat down under an acacia tree. She threw herself back on the soft turf, and gazed up at the sky through its veil of delicate dancing foliage, while she caught the fast-falling white blossoms in her hand. It was a childish attitude and a childish action; but it may have been absently done, for she was still smiling at the joke of the surprised lovers. At last the smile trembled and ceased, and

she hid her face on the mossy turf. Lying there on the grass, with her little slim figure and curly head, she looked like a girl escaped from school, fretting over her tasks or dreaming of fairy princes. But Miss Clarissa was twenty-eight, and a school-mistress ; and had tasks to set instead of to learn, and no lovers to dream of, past, present, or future. So she soon sat upright, brushed off the acacia blossoms, and went into the house to get ready for tea.

Meanwhile, Flossy had taken her way to the long sunny school-room, where sat some twelve or fifteen girls reading *Wilhelm Tell* with the German governess—all, save one or two, evincing in tone, look, or manner a conviction that German and hot afternoons were incompatible elements. There was a little brightening as Miss Florence paused on her way to the dining-room, where her own class of younger ones were preparing their lessons. Mysie sat with her clear eyes fixed

on her book, her soft round face pinker than usual, her little figure very still, her pencil in her hand. Was she taking notes of the lesson?

‘Have you written out your translation, Mysie?’ said Flossy, mischievously.

‘No, Miss Florence,’ said Mysie, in formal school girl fashion; but she could hardly restrain her little quivering smile.

‘These young ladies are idle, Miss Florence,’ said their teacher.

‘That is very wrong of them,’ returned Flossy. ‘There is only one excuse for being idle—’ then, as Mysie looked up with a start, she added, ‘the hot weather.’

Neither romance not hot weather interfered with Miss Florence’s energy over her German lesson, and the sleepy little school-girls had small chance with their brisk young teacher. A bell rang, Flossy fired a concluding question at the sleepest and stupidest, extracted an entirely wrong answer,

and, but slightly disconcerted—for was not she used to it?—ran off to her room, arranged her dress, stuck a great red rose in her hair, and came down to tea.

Miss Florence was much admired by her pupils, and had a sort of half-sympathetic, half-genial pleasure in their admiration. Besides, her rose was as a flag to celebrate the festal occurrence of the afternoon. ‘I always like to wear pretty things when I feel jolly,’ she would say; ‘and if ever you see me going about in a drab dress and a brown veil you may be quite sure I’ve had a disappointment!’

‘Then,’ said Clarissa, ‘if you buy that very pink silk I shall think you have had an offer.’

‘Oh, no; think I don’t want one.’

Flossy crushed her rose under a big straw hat, when she was set free after tea, and took her way merrily along the fields to Redhurst. The way was very pretty, and

the evening lights very charming; but Flossy scurried along, much too full of human nature to care for any other. She had been half playfellow and half teacher to Mysie for years, and had grown up in familiar intercourse with all the household, and was on terms with Arthur of mutual lecturing and teasing.

Redhurst was a square, red house, with white facings; and stood in the midst of pretty, park-like meadows, through which ran the shallow, sedge-grown river, which, nearer Oxley, merged in the sleepy canal. The garden came down to the river's brim, and great white fierce swans and little furry black ducks swam up and down under the willows. The field-path led to an old white stone bridge, looking like a small model of one of those over the Thames, and across it Flossy came into the garden which led up to a terrace and steps in front of the house. So far the garden was rather stiff and old-

fashioned, but croquet hoops profaned the soft turf, garden chairs and a tea-table enlivened the terrace ; a girl of fifteen, with a mane of dark rusty hair, stood on the step, and a lady was sitting in the most comfortable of the chairs above her.

Mrs. Spencer Crichton was as like her son Hugh as a stout, cheerful-looking lady of eight-and-forty can be to a grave young man of eight-and-twenty. She was pale and handsome and fair, and hardly looked her age, so smooth was her brow, so contented her mouth, so ready the smiles that came with equal kindliness for all the young ones who had grown up under her easy sway. It was said that the young people at Redhurst were sadly spoiled—spoiled, that is to say, not by being the objects of devoted affection or too partial admiration, but by being allowed their own way to an extent incredible to more idealistic mothers. Whether from the absence of any very

marked individual affections, or from something of the same cast of mind that produced in her eldest son such even-handed justice, she not only treated all her young kinsfolk with the same kindness, but, so far as they knew, felt for them much the same amount of interest. She did not think it incredible that Arthur should surpass James ; or that, in the few contentions that crossed their sunshiny life, Hugh should sometimes be mistaken. All were sure of a kind judgment, and often of a sense of the rights of their story : none of them made a demand for an exclusive or individual tenderness ; for their bringing-up had made them independent. Mrs. Crichton did not trouble herself much as to whether their idiosyncrasies were suitable or desirable or likely to lead to any one result. It was all right that Hugh should keep to his business ; she did not wish that James was as fond of books as Arthur, since he preferred Art and a great

deal of conversation. George preferred rats and rabbits to either. 'Well, poor George did not like his lessons.' Mysie liked needlework, and flowers, and Sunday schools—'so good of little Mysie.' Frederica thought happiness consisted in a day's hunting. 'She was growing up quite a different sort of girl.'

But Mrs. Crichton was not at all surprised when George got flogged at school for not knowing the lessons, observing 'that George was so stupid he was always in scrapes;' and when Frederica pouted, sobbed, and scowled when some special friend called her a Tom-boy she only heard: 'But you are a Tom-boy, my dear,' as consolation. And when in young enthusiasm, anyone brought his or her special hobby into notice, he or she well knew that, though that hobby might prance unrebuked through the family circle, it was regarded as nothing but 'so-and-so's hobby,' whether it concerned the destinies of the human race or the best way of laying

out flower-beds. There are two sides to everything. It is very pleasant never to be scolded; but when Hugh had laid down some law in a way that bore heavily on his juniors, it was not always quite pleasant to hear his mother placidly say: 'My dear, don't resist, it's Hugh's way to be particular'—as if Hugh's way, and not the thing itself, were all that mattered. Still, light hearts and good tempers had resulted from the kindly, peaceable rule, and the young Spencers lived their own lives and took each other for granted. Hugh might hope that his little Italian song-bird might be accepted as 'Hugh's way,' and Arthur and Mysie need fear no opposition, either tyrannical or conscientious, little as the necessity of each to the other's life might be realised.

'Ah, Flossy,' said Mrs. Crichton, 'I thought we should see you to-night. I suppose Miss Venning told you of what she saw?'

‘Yes,’ returned Flossy, rather shyly; ‘so I came to see Mysie.’

‘Mysie is somewhere. I have told them they must wait in secrecy and silence till Hugh comes home, or he will never forgive us.’

‘Then you don’t object, Mrs. Crichton?’ said Flossy, eagerly.

‘No. Mysie might do better, perhaps, but there is no use in making her miserable if she does not think so herself. Surely people *must* choose for themselves in these matters,’ said Mrs. Crichton, uttering this sentiment—so often practically ignored—as if it were such a truism that Flossy felt as if life was really so easy as to be quite flat.

‘I am sure Arthur will get on,’ she said.

‘Oh, yes; and I don’t know a nicer fellow anywhere. Dear children, how surprised Hugh will be! I wish he would follow their example. But, dear me! I cannot expect him to see with my eyes. There is Arthur!’

Arthur came up and exchanged a hearty squeeze of the hand and delighted smile with Flossy.

‘Mysie is in the garden,’ he said; ‘do come and find her.’

‘Oh, Arthur, I am so glad,’ cried Flossy, impulsively, as she walked away with him. ‘I am so glad that Mrs. Crichton—’

‘Aunt Lily? I prepared several irresistible arguments, and felt as if—well, as if I might have kept them for Hugh. How kind she is! But, now, Flossy, you are unprejudiced; don’t you think I shall make Mysie as happy as that swell in the air who is supposed to loom in the future?’

‘Now, how angry you would be if I did not say yes! How can you expect me to sacrifice your friendship to a disinterested regard for truth?’

‘I want somebody to convince! I feel as if I had been reading hard and the examiners had asked me to decline “Dominus.”’

‘Oh, Arthur, anyone may see where you have been lately. How ungrateful you are!’

‘No, I am not, Flossy,’ said Arthur; ‘but I really feel as if I ought to object to myself as a duty to the family.’

‘Do wait for your cousin,’ said Flossy; ‘he will do that duty for you, no doubt. No, I am *very* glad.’

‘Thank you—thank you,’ said Arthur, pleased at the hearty sympathy in her voice.

‘Ah, there’s Mysie, picking roses.’

‘Now, Arthur, do stay away for five minutes. How can we talk with you there to listen?’

‘Well—make haste.’

Flossy ran away from him and seized Mysie in a warm, and—considering their respective sizes—somewhat overwhelming embrace.

‘My little darling, it’s delightful. I always meant you to have a fairy prince, and to think it should be Arthur!’

‘I am very glad he is not a fairy prince,’
said Mysie, smiling.

‘What is he, then?’ cried Flossy.

‘Why, Flossy,’ said Mysie, ‘I think he’s
only what old Miss Rogers used to call
“Mr. Right.”’

CHAPTER X.

PROS AND CONS.

‘Go back, my lord, across the moor!’

SIGNOR MATTEI was coming out from a rehearsal. He often told Violante that her work was nothing to his; and, indeed, his violin was always in its place in the orchestra. His work was his life, he would have been miserable without it; and yet, with a not uncommon inconsistency, he liked to pity himself for having got it to do. He was a man with an ideal, with a dream that was very difficult of fulfilment; and, perhaps, did not need sympathy less than the girl who suffered so much and disappointed him so

sorely. Whatever may have been Signor Mattei's youthful hopes, in the days when he had thrown away the chance of a more eligible profession to follow the art he so loved, he had long been forced to limit them to making a fair livelihood by it. Aspirations are not always capabilities ; and, spite of self-devotion and enthusiasm and much technical skill, he was not destined to rise to the top of the tree. He was not, indeed, great enough to do as he liked ; and his temper and touchiness often brought good engagements to a premature end ; and, though he had never hitherto failed in obtaining fresh ones, there was an element of uncertainty in his fortunes. However different things might be with him from what he had once desired, Signor Mattei had not been a discontented man. Small successes which he would once have despised were much pleasanter than small failures ; and he had grown to limit his desires to such as were

possible of fulfilment ; when ambition, desire of gain, and burning enthusiasm were all reawakened by the discovery of Violante's wonderful voice. Here was his chance again. His daughter's name should be heard in every capital in Europe : the fortunes of the whole family should be assured. What sacrifices were too great, what toil too arduous by which the possessor of this glorious gift could turn it to account ! If such a voice had belonged to Violante's father how he would have gloried and rejoiced, how he would have worked early and late, how intoxicating would have been the success that crowned his efforts ! People bear much harder on each other by the inevitable workings of their alien natures than by wilful selfishness or cruelty. Violante and her father made each other miserable ; yet he was anxious to give her what would have been to himself the greatest good, and she wore herself out

in trying to obey and to please him. It is not easy for a bystander to judge between distaste and incapacity ; it is difficult to say which is the most provoking. No amount of idleness on Violante's part would have so provoked her father as did her unenthusiastic performance of the amount of study required of her, her tears and terror when she achieved a success. Such folly *must* be curable by a sufficient amount of scolding and argument. A person *must* enjoy what is enjoyable when the advantage is pointed out to them with sufficient strength. And Violante had been just successful enough to make her father believe that it entirely depended on herself to succeed better still. Violante thought this belief cruel ; and Rosa, standing between both, while she prevented either from feeling the very sharpest edge of the other's opinion, if she pitied her little sister the most, to a certain extent sympathised with Signor Mattei.

So much for sentiment. Violante was unworthy of her gift, but she possessed it, and it brought substantial gains, much needed ; for in a life with so many ups and downs Signor Mattei had not held himself free from debt. Besides, no engagement had ever suited him so well as his present one, and was not that confirmed to him by Signor Vasari's interest in his young *prima donna*? If Violante married the manager *her* success was certain, and the fortunes of the whole family were assured; but if Vasari were offended there was an end of everything.

Her gains for her present engagement would belong to her father ; and he felt, though he would not own, that there was enough uncertainty about her future to make the solid good of her marriage most desirable. And Signor Vasari had just made the flattering suggestion that Mdlle. Mattei's timidity and reluctance might be in part owing to a maidenly coyness and

consciousness towards himself. Once acknowledged as his *promessa sposa* she would gain courage and self-confidence. Signor Mattei joyously pledged himself to do everything in his power to favour the manager's views. Art, fame, and fortune all smiled upon him ; and no experience could make Signor Mattei believe that Violante was so unlike other girls as not to view such a proposal with rapture. Full of this pleasing prospect he was walking hastily home from the theatre to his own dwelling, when he was accosted by Hugh Crichton, who begged the favour of a few words with him.

Hugh was courteous and deferential, but he had no expectation that his proposal would not be received with pleasure ; and was desirous, since he must speak to Signor Mattei, to have so far committed himself before he again encountered his brother, whose co-operation when he reached home he felt that he could not altogether afford to

despise. Spite, however, of his not unnatural confidence in the result, he felt very hot and shy; blundered through a few unintelligible sentences; tried Italian, with a view of being polite; forgot the Italian for 'daughter,' 'proposal,' for everything; and finally, with startling abruptness, hoped in plain English that Signor Mattei would consent to his engagement to his daughter. Signor Mattei stopped short in the street, struck an attitude of astonishment, and loudly exclaimed:

‘Signor Hugo! Do my ears deceive me?’

‘No, sir, assuredly not,’ said Hugh, much discomposed at the sudden standstill. ‘I have long admired la signorina Violante, and to-day I have ventured to tell her so.’

‘Tell her so! tell her so!’ ejaculated Signor Mattei. ‘Tell her so, in her father’s absence! Signor, is this the conduct I could expect?’

‘If I have acted in ignorance of Italian

customs,' said Hugh, 'your long residence in England must have informed you that in coming to you at once I have done all that is required by our own. If you will walk on, sir,' for Signor Mattei was still figuring about on the pavement in a way that worried all the sense out of Hugh's head, 'I will explain myself further.'

Signor Mattei, who had really been taken utterly by surprise by Hugh's application, and was not undesirous to gain a little time for consideration, bowed profoundly and walked on by Hugh's side; while the latter, who, with all his desire to make a good impression, felt irritated by his companion's way, began stiffly:

'I should tell you, Signor Mattei, that I am in all respects my own master, and quite independent of everyone. I am not afraid that my mother will not give Mdlle. Mattei a welcome; and of my own feelings, I assure you, sir, they are most—most strong. I

love her, and I hope I shall make her happy—happier than she can be in a profession to which she is so unsuited.'

Hugh was a good speaker, and generally said what he had to say on all public and private occasions with perfect fluency and distinctness; but his eloquence failed him now, and he coloured up and looked entreatingly at Signor Mattei as he made this false step.

'Unsuited to her profession, signor! unsuited to her profession! Do you mean to insult my daughter?'

'I mean that the profession is unsuited to her,' said Hugh, not mending matters.

'Signor, she has been dedicated to my beloved art from her earliest years. Music is her vocation, as in a lesser—I am proud to say in a lesser—degree it is mine.'

Hugh was not naturally conciliatory; and to listen patiently to what he considered such nonsense, uttered with a flash of the eyes

that proved its sincerity, jarred upon him so much that there was as much annoyance as entreaty in his voice as he answered :

‘ I venture to set myself up as a rival to your art, and I ask you for—Violante. Indeed, I don’t think she will regret the fame she gives up.’

Hugh was so sure that it was better for Violante to marry him, an English gentleman, than to sing at all the operas in Europe, he felt that he was making so good an offer, and yet he wanted her so much, that the humility born of passionate desire conquered his sense of his own merits, and he finished pleadingly :

‘ If I can help it she never shall.’

‘ Signor, my daughter is already promised, and the arrangements for her marriage will shortly be begun.’

‘ That is impossible,’ exclaimed Hugh ;
‘ she has given her promise to me.’

‘ Her promise?’ cried Signor Mattei ;

‘ the promise of a little, foolish, most foolish, girl ! No, sir, she knows what my views are, and she is Signor Vasari’s promised wife.’

‘ She knows !’ She—the loving, trustful child whom he had seen kiss his white flowers, who had given herself to him without one word of misgiving. Impossible, indeed.

‘ She shall not be sacrificed,’ cried Hugh, in his turn stopping short. ‘ She has told me that she loves me. Whatever you may have intended her to do is without her will or knowledge.’

Now, in thus asserting Violante’s individuality Hugh made a great mistake. The Italian father did not think that it made much difference if Violante had told Hugh that she loved him twenty times. It was his part to arrange a marriage for her ; and her little wishes, her foolish tongue, went for nothing.

‘I do not believe Mademoiselle Mattei is aware of your wishes,’ said Hugh again, hotly.

Now this was an assertion which Signor Mattei could fairly face. Violante *was* well aware of her father’s wishes. That she was involved in any positive promise she could not know, insomuch as the promise had been made for her at the very time when she had been making a far different one for herself. Nor had she fully known her danger, since Rosa, for the sake of peace and composure, had carefully kept the subject out of sight.

‘Nevertheless, she is aware of them,’ said Signor Mattei; and while Hugh paused, silenced for the moment, he went on, not without dignity:

‘Signor, I thank you. Your proposal honours my little girl, and honours you, since you mean to sacrifice much to win her. But I know your country and your

manners, and I will not give up my daughter. Your noble ladies will not receive her well.'

'There is nothing of the sort—we have no rank at all,' interposed Hugh, 'and I will answer for my mother.'

'My daughter, sir, has a great future before her; she shall not sacrifice it. She shall not marry out of her class and away from her country and give up what Fortune has laid at her feet. Your fancy, Signor, will pass as it came, and hers—pshaw—she has nothing strong in her but her voice, her voice of an angel.'

Signor Mattei was a single-minded man, though he had not dealt singly with Hugh. The good match for his daughter shrank to nothing compared to the career from which it would shut her out. That underneath lurked some consciousness of the advantage to himself is true; but never would he have

dreamed of claiming any like advantages from this other suitor.

Hugh walked on by his side pale and bewildered, a horrible doubt of Violante weakening his arguments and chilling his entreaties. At last he said, desperately, 'Signor Mattei, after what has passed I cannot take my answer from you. She told me nothing of a former promise. She must tell me that she has made none, and then I swear to you her life shall have none of the trials you dread. I will either go home and bring you my mother's words of welcome—my mother herself,' he continued, rashly, 'or I will seek no consent at all—none is needed. I would marry her to-morrow if you care for such a test.'

'You in England, Signor, may marry spite of a parent's curse.'

'Curse! nonsense,' said Hugh, impatiently.

‘But here a father’s word is enough. She *can* give you no answer but mine.’

‘I will have an answer from her,’ said Hugh; ‘and if she can tell me she is not promised to that fellow I will never give her up till—till I have persuaded you to take a different view of this.’

‘But she is promised, sir, and I refuse to entertain your proposals for her.’

‘She never told me so!’

‘She is timid,’ said Signor Mattei, with a shrug, ‘timid, and, like all girls, a fool. Enough; I can say no more, Signor. I have the honour to wish you good evening.’ And, with a rapidity for which Hugh was unprepared, Signor Mattei darted down a side street, and left him to himself.

Baffled as he was, Hugh did not mean to rest satisfied with his answer. He could not believe that the opposition would hold out after he had proved himself to be thoroughly in earnest. If only the horrible doubt of

Violante's own fair dealing could be removed !—and removed it should be the first time he had the chance of a word with her. For Hugh was not a suspicious person, and it would have been hard indeed to doubt the shy yet passionate tenderness of Violante's voice and face. He did not understand the entanglement, but he was not going to convict her without a trial. Still, this later interview had effectually brought him down to earth ; and he went back to the Consulate with the arguments which were to bring James over to his side by no means in such order as he had hoped. He found the ladies drinking coffee and James discoursing on the delights of his afternoon ramble.

‘ I assure you, Miss Tollemache, she had eyes like a gazelle, and her smile—there was intelligence and intellect in it ; you could see by the way that she smiled that she had a mind, you know.’

‘But flower-girls always do smile, Mr. Crichton.’

‘Ah, but how different this was from the made-up smiles you see in England—such a sense of art, too, in her white handkerchief—no hats and feathers. She only said, “Grazie, signor!” but there was a sort of recognition, you know, of one’s interest in her.’

‘I shall go and look at her,’ said Emily.

‘Now, if one lived in a simpler state of society,’ pursued Jem, ‘what curious intercourse one might have with such a being—how much she might add to one’s knowledge of existence! How one can imagine the great men of old—Raphael in search of the Beautiful—dancing in the evening! Oh, Hugh, I didn’t see you! Where have you been?’

‘Where have *you* been would be more to the point,’ retorted Hugh. ‘In one of Bulwer’s novels?’

‘He has fallen in love with a flower-girl,’ said Emily.

‘Emily, my dear,’ said her mother, ‘Mr. Crichton was only describing an artistic effect. It is very desirable to cultivate a love of nature.’

‘Very,’ said Jem. His enthusiasm had been perfectly genuine, though he had not been without a desire to interest his audience ; and he could not resist a side glance at Hugh, who looked hot and cross.

‘Have you seen any flower-girls, Mr. Crichton?’ said Emily, wickedly.

‘No, Miss Tollemache, nothing so interesting ;’ and then a sudden sense of the extreme falsity of his words came over him ; and he blushed in a violent, foolish way, which completed his annoyance with things in general.

James saw the blush and knew that something had happened. He did not, how-

ever, quite like to question his brother ; and when the ladies left them they went out on the balcony and for some time smoked in silence.

At last Hugh knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and said, in a formal, uncomfortable tone :

‘James, I have made a proposal to Mdlle. Mattei.’

‘The deuce you have!’ ejaculated Jem.. ‘And what did she say?’

‘She accepted it. But, Jem, you may entirely disabuse your mind of the idea that there has been any attempt to—to catch me ; for her father has just given me to understand that he will not consent to it.’

‘What! he prefers the manager!’

‘So he says.’

‘And she doesn’t?’

‘No,’ very shortly. ‘But I cannot suppose that if he was fully aware of the

genuineness of my intentions and knew that my mother would receive her —— In short, Jem, another person's words ——'

'Another person? Do you mean me? Answer for mamma? I declare, Hugh, that's a little too much. You're going to raise such a row at home as was never heard of, and you want me to help you!'

Hugh said nothing, and James's momentary perturbation subsided.

'This is good!' he said. '*You* wanting help! Did you ever live in Oxley, Hugh, or is it all a mistake? "Jones at the opera abroad" is so *very* unlike "Jones at the opera at home."'

'I am in earnest, Jem,' said Hugh, as James did all the laughing at his own joke.

'It's a great mistake being in earnest,' said Jem. 'Here have you spoilt all your fun by it.'

'I don't understand you.'

‘Why,’ said Jem, mischievously. ‘Of course, Violante was intended to amuse you during your holiday. A little sentiment—study of life.’

‘I have asked Mdlle. Mattei to be my wife,’ interrupted Hugh, in a tone of high offence.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Jem, after a moment’s pause. ‘I’ll be serious. So Signor Mattei is the difficulty? H’m! How far do you suppose he is involved with this dangerous rival?’

‘That is what I cannot make out. He says that she, Violante, is engaged to him; but she never mentioned his name.’

‘Told you nothing about him?’

‘No. So the question is,’ said Hugh, in a voice that he tried hard to keep at an even level, ‘the question is, who is deceiving me?’

‘Both and neither,’ returned Jem.

‘What?’

‘I dare say she likes you best, and thinks she will try to get out of her previous entanglement.’

‘She should have spoken the truth,’ said Hugh, frowning.

‘Come, Hugh, that’s expecting a great deal of a poor little frightened thing like that, and an Italian, too. What would you have?’

‘You did not see her?’ said Hugh.

James looked at him, and saw that his hand shook as he put his pipe back into its case while he kept his face turned away.

‘What shall you do?’ he said.

‘Find out,’ returned Hugh, ‘and act accordingly.’

He walked away as he spoke. James did not suppose it likely that Violante would come out of the ordeal with such flying colours as to satisfy his brother; and, though he was very little inclined to judge the poor

child harshly, he could not help hoping that here was a way of escape for Hugh from a most unlucky prepossession, though, as he was forced to acknowledge, at the cost of considerable pain.

CHAPTER XI.

CONTRARY WINDS.

‘Oh, well for him whose will is strong!’

‘Rosa! you were mistaken! He loves me—he says so. Oh, I am so happy—he is so good!’ cried Violante, as she ran to meet her sister and threw herself into her arms. Timid as the southern maiden might be she had none of the proud, reticent ‘shamefastness’ that would have led an English girl to conceal her joy even from herself. It was all right and natural; and as Rosa, aghast, dropped into a chair she knelt beside her,

her sweet, pathetic eyes and lips transfigured as a flower by the sun.

‘What did he say to you?’ exclaimed Rosa.

‘He loves me—he is coming back again. He does not mind about my singing—— Ah, I cannot tell you,’ and the bright face drooped with sudden bashfulness.

‘Oh!’ cried Rosa, passionately, as she pulled off her hat and fanned herself with it; ‘what a foolish world this is! What has he said? what has he done?’ she repeated, almost fiercely.

‘He asked me to marry him,’ said Violante, with a sort of dignity.

‘Oh, dear! he is a very foolish young man. What is to come of it?—what *can* come of it? Nothing but trouble.’

Violante gazed at her, mute and frightened; then her face brightened with an incredulous smile.

‘Oh, if you had never seen him!’

‘Rosa!’ cried Violante, springing to her feet, ‘rather than that, I would be miserable for ever—rather than *that*, I would die.’

‘Because you are as silly as the rest! Oh, you unlucky child! don’t you see that it is impossible? Either he will go back to his own people and they will talk him out of it, or he will marry you in spite of them. But no, he shall never do that!’

‘But he said it would be right,’ said Violante; then, as Rosa laughed bitterly, she went on, pleadingly: ‘Oh, Rosa mia, it is you who are silly. *He* will make it right. Indeed, I am happy; but I cannot bear to see you cry. I will act, I shall not care now, and you must keep father from being vexed.’

There was much in Violante’s speech of the unconscious selfishness of one to whom the part of comforter was a strange reversion of ordinary life; but her caresses were very sweet to Rosa, who, recovering herself with an effort, said:

‘Well, Violante, you can’t expect me to believe in him as you do! I never thought it would come to this!’

‘But, Rosa, you will not try to stop it?’

Rosa hesitated. Even supposing Hugh entirely faithful, what doubtful happiness lay before her sister; and, if not, what a blank of disappointment, what hopeless injury, what misery how unendurable to the girl who shrank and trembled at a harsh word!

Rosa sat upright and gazed straight before her, while Violante watched, unable to understand her face.

‘No!’ at length she exclaimed, ‘you must take your chance with the rest of us. How can I or anyone help it? But—but—I’ll never stop anyone’s love—oh, my little darling, my little darling!’ and Rosa broke down into tears, hiding her face in the girl’s soft hair.

‘Rosa, you think I could not bear any trouble; but I could—for him.’

There was a new fervour in her voice, and Rosa yielded to it. ‘Oh, I hope you will be happy,’ she said.

‘Why, you see I am happy!’ said Violante, with a childish laugh. ‘Father is late; let us have some coffee—you are so hot and tired, I will get it. There is no terrible opera to-night. Maddalena! Maddalena!’

‘Ah! signorina, *I* know who nearly broke the china bowl.’

‘Why, *I* did, Maddalena! *I* threw it down,’ said Violante, as she tripped about after the old woman, whose gold hair-pins were quivering with sly triumph. ‘But it is quite safe—not a crack in it.’

The coffee was finished; the bright, hot sun went down; and the sisters sat long by the open window in the warm, pleasant twilight. Violante fell into dreamy silence; Rosa also. But there was a great gulf between their meditations, though they were

thinking of the same subject and, partly, of the same person.

‘There’s father!’ cried Violante, as a step sounded. ‘Oh, I will run away, and you shall tell him.’

‘No, no, you little coward; he will be sure to ask for you—stay a minute.’

Violante leant back against the window-sill, her eyes drooping, her breast heaving, and yet her face flushing and dimpling,—the new confidence almost conquering the old fear. Rosa looked far the more frightened of the two. Signor Mattei’s step came up the great staircase quick as a boy’s; he seemed almost to skate across the polished floor, so instantaneously did he bear down on his daughters. In a moment his roll of music was cast aside in one direction, his great white umbrella in another; and, with accents rising every moment into higher indignation, he exclaimed: ‘Violante, what folly is this that I hear? Is this what all your idleness and

obstinacy mean? I'll not hear a word of it. A lover, indeed! Never let me hear of it again!

Violante stood breathless, but Rosa interposed:

'Has Mr. Crichton been talking to you, father?'

'Ay, and a fine story he brought me. Talking of promises, indeed! How dare she dream of making promises? And you—what have you been doing? Taking care of your sister? No! No! Encouraging her in disobedience and deceit!'

Now Signor Mattei was wont, on all occasions of domestic disturbance, to relieve his feelings by the most voluble scoldings that the Italian temperament could suggest and the Italian tongue express. Had Violante broken the china bowl she would probably have heard nearly as many reproaches; but no amount of experience ever accustomed her to these outbreaks; and,

though practically she had never been ill-treated, she feared her father far more than he guessed; while Rosa usually answered him back more promptly than respectfully, and, loving him better than Violante did, often ended by having her own way. Now she said :

‘Why are you angry with Violante, father? She has done nothing wrong. Is it her fault if Mr. Crichton loves her and has asked her to marry him?’

‘Asked her—asked *her*! How dared he ask *her*? Now, most undutiful, most ungrateful child, how long has this conspiracy lasted?’

‘He came to-day,’ stammered Violante.

‘To-day? You tell me this folly has begun to-day! You, who have been secretly sighing for this stranger, sighing for him instead of singing! Ah—shame on you!—tell me—tell me—*tell me!*’ in a rapid

crescendo, as he seized her wrist and pulled her towards him.

Violante burst into tears.

‘Father! how can you speak to her so?’ cried Rosa. ‘Let her go—and I will tell you. Mr. Crichton never said a word to her till to-day. Why will you not consent to their engagement?’

‘Because I know my duty as a father better. But it is all over. Do you hear, Violante? I have ended it for ever!’

‘Oh, father,’ cried Violante, holding out her hands imploringly, ‘I will not neglect my singing, I will practise all day long; but you would break my heart—oh, dear father, I love him;’ and the poor child, with unwonted courage, went up to her father and put her arms round his neck with a look and gesture that, could she have called them up at will, would have settled her stage difficulties for ever.

‘No, Violante!’ Signor Mattei said. ‘You

know what my wish has been. You were not free to promise yourself; and to-day I have made my arrangements with Signor Vasari and have promised you to him.'

'Father, father, I would kill myself first!' cried Violante, dropping on her knees and hiding her face. 'Oh, Rosa—Rosa—help me!'

'Hush, hush, my child. Stand up and control yourself,' said Rosa, with English dislike to a scene—a kind of self-consciousness shared by neither father nor sister. 'Go away—go into our room. I will talk to father first.'

Violante rushed away with her hands over her face, and then the other two prepared for war.

Signor Mattei divested himself of his neck-tie, rubbed his hands through his hair, marched up and down the room, and said :

'Now, Rosa, be reasonable, be dutiful, and hear what I have to say.'

Rosa sat down by the table, with a red spot on each cheek, and took up her knitting.

‘Yes, father, that is just what I wish. I want to know what has happened.’

‘Am I a cruel father? Do I beat or starve you, or do I work all day for my ungrateful children?’

‘I think you were cruel to Violante, father, when you called her deceitful.’

‘Violante is a little fool. Now, once for all, Rosa, I will have no disputes. This very day I have promised her to Vasari.’

‘Father!’ cried Rosa, in high indignation. ‘It is one thing to forbid her engagement to Mr. Crichton, and quite another to insist on her marrying Vasari. I would not stand it.’

‘But you, *figlia mia*, have the sense to decide for yourself,’ said Signor Mattei, with a little flattery inexpressibly provoking

to the downright Rosa. 'Your sister is a child, and cannot judge. Consider. This young Englishman goes home. The proud ladies of his house would see him mouldering in his grave before they blessed his betrothal.'

'I don't believe they would be so ridiculous! And he is quite independent. But I agree with you, father, that it would be a very unfortunate thing if he married her without his friends' consent, and what we could not agree to. But he speaks confidently of being able to gain it.'

'He speaks!' echoed Signor Mattei, with scorn. 'He speaks! He goes home—he sees his folly. Flattered by the flowers of his own aristocracy will he remember Violante?'

'I don't believe he has anything to do with the aristocracy! Of course, father, I see *all* the risks—they are fearful ones; but the other way is such certain misery,' said Rosa, faltering. 'How will she bear it!'

‘Rosa, I am surprised at you. Can you not see the benefits of this marriage?’

‘Yes, I know all that,’ said Rosa, sturdily. ‘I know, *if* she could make up her mind to it, it would be a very good thing for her and for all of us. But, father, married or single, she will never make an actress, it will kill her; and she *hates* Vasari.’

Then Signor Mattei’s patience fairly gave way.

‘Hates him! Don’t tell me of anything so absurd. How many girls, do you think, have hated their suitors and been happy enough! *That* is no reason.’

In spite of Rosa’s English breeding she had seen instances enough of the truth of this remark not to have an instant contradiction ready. It *might* turn out well; which was all that could be said in favour of Hugh Crichton; and yet Rosa felt that, had she been Violante, she would have willingly

risked her all in favour of that one glorious possibility. 'But it doesn't always pay,' she thought, and while she hesitated, thinking how such a risk had once been run and run in vain, her father spoke again.

'Now, Rosa, listen. Mild as a lamb in daily life, in emergencies I am a lion; and my will is law, you cannot change it. Violante shall be Vasari's wife. I have promised, I will perform.' Here Signor Mattei struck his hand on the table in a highly effective manner. 'She will be raised above all the uncertainties of our profession, need not work beyond her strength, and we shall share in her success. To this she must agree, and if you will not promise to see that she does so I shall send her to Madame Cellini's.'

Madme Cellini was a fine old opera-singer who had married and settled in Civita Bella. She had shown much kindness to the motherless girls and had not

been an injudicious friend to them ; but her contempt for Violante's fears and her strenuous efforts to rouse her to a sense of her privileges had rendered her instructions and herself an object of dread ; and Rosa answered, after a pause :

‘ I will promise to remain neutral. If Violante can be happy without Hugh Crichton I had far rather she did not marry him. But if she is sent away or too much coerced she will be utterly unable to act. Let her alone, and I don't suppose she will hold out very long.’

‘ You will send no letters or messages ? ’

‘ No,’ said Rosa ; ‘ I promise that I will not. I shall leave her to herself.’

To herself ! To her weak will and her cowardly spirit ! How long would they hold out ?

Rosa went in search of her ; and, as Violante sprang towards her exclaiming,

‘Oh, Rosa, you will help me!’ she held her back.

‘No, Violante, I cannot help and I will not hinder you. Father is determined, and you must do it, if do it you will, all yourself. If I move a finger, you will be sent away from me; but I will not try to persuade you either way.’

Violante stood still, with despair in her face. How could she resist her father for an hour? She crept away to bed, at Rosa’s suggestion; received her kisses with passive absence of offence; and, as she hid her face on her pillow, thought not of self-support but of the only help left to her. ‘*He* will come again to-morrow—they will listen to *him*.’

CHAPTER XII.

LEFT TO HERSELF.

‘As we have met, we shall not meet again
For ever, child, for ever!’

LEFT to herself! In the early morning Violante’s senses awoke from the confusion of disturbed and dreamy sleep; and, with burning eyes and throbbing temples, she sat upright and tried to think ‘for herself.’

‘*He* will come and persuade father.’ She repeated this watchword over and over again to herself; but the new confidence could hardly combat the old experience, and she could not realise that ‘father’ would be over-persuaded—even by her lover.

Childish as Violante was she had grown up too much in the constant discussion of ways and means not to be quite aware of the worldly advantages of Signor Vasari's offer. Those attaching to Hugh Crichton's were like a dim and distant dream, scarcely to be realised; nor had she, in the abstract, any sense that she would be unfairly treated by being deprived of her right of choice. Perhaps no creature ever entered on a conflict with less hope of success. She felt so sure that neither prayers nor tears would move her father that she never thought of trying their effect; while Signor Vasari seemed still more inexorable. If Hugh did not somehow set it right for her what remained but submission? 'I had rather die; but I shall be so frightened, I shall say yes,' she thought. 'They have always made me do what they wish. I could not help it! There's no one to help me—no one!' Her cowardice and weak-

ness had been so often cast in the poor child's teeth that she had lost every scrap of confidence in her own powers. Her father said, 'You *shall* give in,' Rosa said, 'You cannot hold out;' and Violante knew nothing of a Strength not her own, of a Hand that would hold hers more firmly than sister's or lover's. Her love was the strongest thing about her: would it hold her up? She thought with a kind of ardour of resisting and refusing, of holding out and dying rather than yielding. But all the time she knew that she should yield; that she could not act and sing between the two fires of father and suitor; that the long days of conflict would not kill her all at once, but would each one be very miserable and hard to endure, and would each one wear out a little of her strength. For Violante had some experience of troublous times, and knew very well what it meant to be unhappy and in disgrace.

‘He will come; he will help me.’ She pushed aside the thought of what was to follow and resolved to please her father as much as possible, in the hope of protracting matters till Hugh should have time to interfere. So, to Rosa’s surprise, she appeared in a clean muslin dress and a pink ribbon and sat down to sing her scales, instead of lying in bed and crying, as inclination would have prompted. Nay, she carried her father his cup of chocolate, and kept her hand from trembling as he took it from her. Signor Mattei viewed all this as betokening intended submission: Rosa was puzzled. For the first time she could not understand Violante.

The morning hours wore away; there was, fortunately, no rehearsal. Violante sat in the window with some knitting in her lap. She did not say one word to Rosa of her fears or her intentions. Steps came up the stairs and across the corridor, and

Signor Mattei ushered in the great Vasari himself. Rosa started up and came forward to receive him. Violante shrank into her corner; she grew white and cold, but she set her mouth, and under her long eye-lashes her eyes looked hard and strange.

‘Signor,’ said Signor Mattei, ‘here is my daughter. I give her to you with profound pleasure, and assure you that she is sensible of the honour of your choice.’

Violante spoke not a word. She rose up, obedient to her father’s eye, and, perhaps, somewhat urged by the long habit of obedience to the manager. She dared not utter the refusal on her lips. What would they do to her; what would they say? It was better to submit—to submit till *he* came. Signor Vasari took her by the hand, bowed profoundly, and offered to her a handsome diamond cross and chain of pearls.

‘Permit me, Signorina; they were the jewels of a princess.’

He fastened it on her neck, and then, putting his arm around her, drew her towards him as he had done before now—on the stage. Violante started and lifted her eyes. There stood Hugh Crichton within the door, his eyes fixed on her, his face as pale as hers.

‘Signor Mattei, you were right, and I thank you,’ he said in English, and in a hard, fierce voice. Then he turned and was gone, before anyone spoke a word.

Suddenly Violante wrenched herself out of Vasari’s grasp. She pulled the cross off her neck, scattering the pearls far and wide as she threw it on the floor.

‘I hate you!’ she said, ‘I hate you! And if you marry me I will kill you.’

‘Signorina!’ ejaculated the astonished manager.

‘Violante, Violante!’ cried Rosa.

‘I hate you!’ she repeated, and then she threw herself on her knees.

‘Father, father, father, kill me, kill me first.’

‘Ungrateful, wicked child, you are driving a dagger into my breast!’ cried Signor Mattei.

‘I am deceived, I am deceived, but I will have my rival’s blood!’ exclaimed Vasari.

‘Signor Vasari, you are treading on that cross and spoiling it,’ said Rosa. ‘Violante, for shame! You don’t know what you say.’

‘I do know,’ said Violante; but the quick reaction was coming, and she let Rosa lift her up and cowered into her arms, trembling and shivering. Her defiance was over, and had come, like the actions of most cowards, five minutes too late.

‘Signor Vasari,’ said Rosa, ‘I think you had better leave us and—and—come again when my sister is more herself. I will pick up the pearls, and—and, father, isn’t that best?’

‘La Signorina has no lack of passion

when it suits her turn,' said Vasari, with a sneer. 'Yes, I will go—but, as to coming again, that is another matter.'

Then Signor Mattei broke out into a perfect storm of invective and adjuration, calling the Saints to witness his own honest dealing, and speaking of and to Violante in terms of such anger and contempt as were hardly calculated to excuse her to her lover. Violante shook like a leaf, but made no attempt at an answer, and Rosa at last pulled her away from the room, leaving her father still in the full flow of his eloquence and Signor Vasari stiff and upright with offended dignity, yet casting involuntary and half-unconscious glances at his scattered pearls.

Hugh Crichton, on the other hand, had suffered since his interview with Signor Mattei, from a kind of doubt, not unnatural to a man treading on unknown ground. He would have had far more confidence in Violante had she been the Miss Katie

Clinton whose cause his mother advocated, little as he would have believed anyone who had echoed the sentiment; and when Mr. Tollemache came in before dinner and said that all the world was talking of Made-moiselle Mattei's great good luck in her engagement to Signor Vasari, Hugh turned visibly pale, and James said :

‘Is it a fact or a rumour, Mr. Tollemache?’

‘A fact, I believe. I had it from young Contarini, who haunts the musical world; and he said Vasari had told him of it himself.’

Neither looked at Hugh, who sat still for a moment and then got up and went away. James could not help a look of consternation, and Mr. Tollemache said :

‘I assure you, Crichton, I had no notion anything serious was going on. Hugh's the last fellow I should have suspected of—of ——’

‘Making such a fool of himself?’ said

James. 'Well—you see he never could take things in moderation.'

'He's well out of the scrape, in my opinion.'

'Yes, poor old boy, I suppose he is. The rest of us are, at any rate.'

Dinner passed, of course, with no reference to the subject; nor did Hugh mention it till the next morning, when, alone with Jem, he said, with a nervous laugh but an odd twitch in his voice :

'Jem, you profess to understand young women. Which should you have said was the favoured one?'

Jem was driven into a corner. He certainly had thought that Violante had favoured Hugh. He thought so still, and felt pretty sure that she was not a free agent; but he did not wish to say so, and yet he could not but be touched by the eager wistful look with which Hugh regarded him.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I thought she looked graciously on you ; but you see the—’

‘If so,’ interrupted Hugh, ‘I’d marry her to-morrow, spite of them all.’

‘Good heavens, Hugh !’ cried Jem. ‘Don’t think of such a thing ! I don’t believe Tollemache would consent. It’s impossible !’

‘Tollemache ?’

‘British Consul, you know. You *can’t* get married out here as if it was Gretna Green ; and I won’t have a hand in it ; I declare, Hugh, I won’t,’ cried Jem. ‘It’s all very well, but I won’t, you know ; and there’s an end of it.’

‘I did not ask you,’ said Hugh, coldly, but becoming conscious that to marry Violante without the consent of her friends or his was, under the circumstances, utterly impossible.

He said no more to James, but resolved to see Violante once again at all hazards. How he saw her, and what effect the scene

he beheld had on a mind already full of doubts and suspicions, has been already told. Anger, intensified by the recollection of how he had once before been treated, swallowed up every other feeling. He went back to the Consulate and met his brother on the stairs.

‘I shall go home, Jem,’ he said. ‘I cannot stay here. You can explain and follow when you like. Yes, it’s all at an end. Never speak of it any more.’

James could obtain no word of explanation—no single particular—as he tried to help Hugh to pack up his things and to arrange some decent sort of leave-taking. Hugh was too desperate to care who was surprised at his proceedings. The ladies were out, and he wrote three lines of courteous thanks to Mrs. Tollemache, but wished her son good-bye without any reason given, and never gave his brother a chance of sympathizing with or restraining him.

‘I am going straight home,’ he said, as he went away.

‘Well!’ exclaimed Mr. Tollemache, ‘who could have expected such a tornado?’

‘Oh,’ said Jem, ‘Hugh never could take circumstances into consideration. I believe the poor little thing was as much in love with him as she knew how. How could he expect her to tell the truth about the manager? Of course she liked Hugh, and of course she told fibs, and now she will cry her eyes out, and then marry Vasari after all. What else can she do, poor little victim? And then there’s Hugh, who won’t dance four times with a girl for fear of “exciting false expectations,” has gone and broken her heart—if hearts ever are broken. Much he knows about the tricks girls will play to avoid an uproar! Poor little, pretty thing!’

‘I don’t care for the girl,’ said Mr. Tollemache, ‘but it’s no joke about Hugh.’

‘Poor old fellow, no; but those things

pass off, you know ; and, after all, anything's better than that he should have married her.'

'Undoubtedly,' said Mr. Tollemache.

'Poor little child !' repeated Jem, with a not unkindly pity, but which yet made small account of Violante beside the other interests involved.

And so Hugh Crichton went away from Civita Bella, and Violante was left behind him.

PART III.

ARTHUR'S STORY.

‘I love thee to the level of every day’s
Most quiet need—by sun and candle-light.’

CHAPTER XIII.

MYSIE.

‘Oh, happy spirit, wisely gay!’

‘WHAT are you doing, Mysie?’ said Florence Venning, as she came one afternoon into the Redhurst drawing-room.

‘I am sewing a button on Arthur’s glove,’ returned Mysie, who was sitting by herself on a low chair in the window with a smart little work-basket by her side. ‘Do you know, Floss, Hugh is coming back to-night? Aunt Lily had a line from him from Paris.’

‘Dear me! And do you want to get the button sewn on before he comes?’

Mysie shook her head, smiling, while Flossy went on: 'Seriously, Mysie, aren't you in a great fright?'

'No!' answered Mysie, 'I cannot see why I should be in a fright. You know, Flossy, I have never been at all afraid of Hugh. I know he always does what he thinks right. And he knows what *is* right, too.'

'Well, but suppose he says you are too young?'

'But I shall explain to him,' said Mysie, 'that I am not young. Now, don't laugh, Flossy; but I can't help feeling that when people are so very sure of themselves as I am they must be able to make others believe in them.'

'That's a profound remark,' said Flossy.

'I'm not at all changeable,' said Mysie, 'and I know I shall be able to make Hugh understand that I am quite in earnest.' There was a peculiar intensity in her quiet

voice ; and as she lifted up her eyes, clear and serene, Flossy felt that they would have convinced her of anything.

‘It will be very unromantic if you don’t get anything to try your constancy,’ said Flossy, teasingly.

‘Well, one can be very happy without romance,’ said Mysie, laughing. ‘Romance generally means something rather uncomfortable.’

‘Well,’ said Flossy, in her full, clear tones, ‘so does love—generally. I always observe that when a girl can’t do her lessons, or can’t eat her dinner, and is dismal and rather a bore, Mary has a confidence from home about her. And if one happens to see the man he’s generally such a *creature*. Now, I can imagine regarding St. Ambrose ——’

‘Flossy !’

‘Well, of course, I mean some one like him. I think my ideal is a mixture of intellect and strong common-sense, something like

King Alfred. And I greatly admire the strength of Luther and Hampden; only those people are so often on the wrong side. But you see, Mysie, I shall never meet the great man of the age, and I shall never care for anyone unless he is wiser, cleverer, and better than I am myself!

‘That would be so difficult to find,’ said Mysie.

‘Mysie, how dare you be so sarcastic!’ cried Flossy, with a great, hearty laugh. ‘But I don’t care; I can do without him, and when he turns up I’ll let you know.’

‘Is he to be anything like that man in your old story who never smiled?’ said Mysie.

‘No, no, that was a *very* juvenile idea. But, Mysie,’ coming nearer and speaking with slight embarrassment, ‘there *is* a story and a hero in it. I wonder if you would like him.’

‘Oh, do show it to me.’

‘Then, you must promise not to tell

Arthur. Ah, is Arthur so cool as you are about your cousin?’

‘No,’ said Mysie, ‘he says that he should say “no” in Hugh’s place. But,’ she concluded quietly, ‘that is because it is coming so near.’

‘And what has become of Arthur now?’

‘There’s a cricket-match between Redhurst and Oxley, and Arthur is playing. Will you come down to the ground? Aunt Lily’s there and Frederica; they went to pay a call first.’

Flossy assented, and Mysie went upstairs to put on her hat. She was a girl with a great many quiet little tastes of her own, and her room gave opportunities for the study of them. There was something about her far removed from the ordinary hurry and bustle of modern young-ladyhood. She was noted in the family for always having time for everything. So on her table lay an album and a book of photographs, set in little

paintings, and a basket containing pin-cushions and needle-books of wonderful shapes and capable workmanship, besides other varieties of fancy-work. Mysie dearly loved needlework, and secretly regretted the days when she could have stitched Arthur's shirts for him. There were flowers, gathered and growing, and quiet, dainty little birds—avadevats and the like—hanging in the window; while on the mantelpiece was almost every little possession of Mysie's short existence: the China dogs and the China shepherds of her babyhood, the little glass tea-set and the spun-glass boxes of advancing childhood, up to the pots and scent bottles—her schoolfellows' presents in later years. For Mysie never lost or broke anything, and never grew tired of anything because it was old. She kept her big wax doll in her wardrobe, and all her old story-books on the shelf in company with Arthur's birthday present of Tennyson's poems, and such and so

many works of fiction as might be expected on a young lady's book-shelves whose taste was exceedingly correct and who was able to gratify it. Mysie had, however, two little tastes of her own. She was fond of very sentimental poetry, which she read, copied, and learnt by heart quietly to herself, not feeling at all hurt if Arthur laughed at it or Flossy declared that it lowered her spirits ; but, being an exceedingly happy little person, she had somehow a peculiar relish for faded flowers, bygone days, sad hearts, and all such imagery. She also liked all books containing quaint and pregnant sayings of wit or wisdom ; read George Herbert and Bacon's essays ; and when asked, as a little girl, which part of the Bible she liked best to read had replied : ' The Book of Proverbs : it was so exceedingly true.'

With every possibility of being an idle young lady Mysie was really useful and industrious, good, and pious—in the simplest

meaning of that much abused word. She was a far more developed person than her lover, young as she was ; and she loved him with all the force of old association, sisterly admiration and anxiety, mingling with the newer and sweeter dependence on his talents and his counsel. She believed in him, but her instinct was to advise him and to take care of him and to think of what was good for him, even while his opinions had unconsciously moulded many of her own ; and to please him was her greatest delight.

Carefully she arranged her little hat, with its wild-rose trimming, and settled her pretty summer dress before she rejoined Flossy and started with her for the cricket-field, where several ladies and other spectators were already watching Arthur making runs in a white flannel suit edged with scarlet, which Mysie thought exceedingly becoming. Mrs. Crichton made room for them on a bench beside her. Frederica and Flossy

began to compare notes of the runs ; while Mysie sat in the bright sun, dreamily contemplating her lover's prowess. Some of the cricketers came up to speak to them ; one of the Oxley curates, in black trousers and a grey shirt, eagerly pointed out to Flossy the performance of a mutual protégé. Mrs. Harcourt, the wife of the old rector of Redhurst, made the welcome announcement that she had ordered afternoon tea to be brought into the field. Mysie's Redhurst Sunday scholars curtsied and smiled at her from a distance ; and the far more elegant damsels of Oxley, who absorbed all Flossy's unprofessional efforts in the way of teaching, made her gracious bows, and offered her an opportunity of studying how to dress, or not to dress, hair of every shade of black, brown, flaxen, and auburn. A detachment from Oxley Manor, headed by Clarissa and the German governess, appeared at a discreet distance. Mysie became aware that Arthur

saw her, and was making his thirtieth run under the inspiring influence of her eyes when a tall shadow fell on the dry, sunny grass, and a well-known voice said, 'Well, mother, how are you?'

'My dear Hugh! *How* you surprised me; we did not expect you till dinner time!'

'I came half-an-hour ago; and finding you were all down here I thought I would follow you.'

'Quite right. How are you, and have you enjoyed yourself?'

'Very well; and I have enjoyed myself exceedingly,' said Hugh.

'Where's Jem?'

'In London, to-day, I believe, but we did not travel back together. He wanted to see some other places.'

'And Civita Bella was charming? You are sunburnt, Hugh.'

'Civita Bella is a very charming place,

with sun enough to burn anyone. How d'ye do, Mysie? I did not see you.'

Mysie put her hand into Hugh's and felt her courage sink to her toes.

'I'm very well, Hugh, thank you,' she said, in a small voice; and then she perceived that Arthur had caught sight of his cousin, found himself 'out,' he hardly knew how, and came over towards them with his face much more crimson than exertion need have made it.

'Well, Arthur, I congratulate you,' said Hugh. 'On your degree,' he added, as Arthur started and looked blank.

'Oh, I forgot,' said Arthur, as he turned his back on Hugh and Mysie, in an awkward boyish way, and began to talk vehemently to the two Miss Dickensons, daughters of the Oxley doctor, with whom he had been sometimes accused of flirting; while Hugh turned to receive various greetings. To all this he had looked forward, and his manner and look

did him credit, for, as his mother said, 'he seemed as if he had never been away.'

Poor Hugh! When miles away from Civita Bella he had come to himself, as it were, after the passion of rage and grief in which he had left the city, he had resolved to cut the past seven weeks out of his life and to let them leave no trace behind. No one knew anything about them but James, who could well be trusted to keep the secret at home; they were utterly apart from all the rest of his life, and they should remain so. All their joy and all their pain should be buried for ever. These few short days should not influence all the rest of his life. What difference could it make to Redhurst and Oxley that a little Italian girl had made a fool of him? He had plenty of interests which remained unaltered, and this thing should be, what James had called it, a foolish holiday incident that was over and done. This resolution, though prompted by resent-

ment, was agreeable to common-sense ; and Hugh was not likely to betray himself. He knew that he must suffer a certain amount of pain, and then he supposed it would be over ; if not he must bear it. What was there to see here while he waited for the train ? A cathedral : he would go and see it.

And a girl offered him a great bouquet of roses and oleanders, such as Violante had put in the china bowl. Hugh turned off with a sharp refusal ; but suddenly thought : ‘ What, if after all I was mistaken ! If I had waited one moment longer—’ and the torment of that doubt, which yet was not strong enough to prompt any measure for its own satisfaction, haunted him and fretted him as the actual sorrow could not do, for it was a doubt of himself.

He had always been grave, and he was too strong and vigorous for trouble to tell easily on his health ; so his appearance struck no one as unnatural, while he answered his

mother's enquiries about the Tollemaches, and described the beauties of Civita Bella—rather proud to find that he could do it so easily. Moreover, the home party had an absorbing interest of their own; and as soon as the match had ended, in the triumph of Redhurst, Mrs. Crichton took her son's arm to walk home with him, and Mysie and Arthur slipped away by a different path through the lanes.

Arthur put out his hand and took hold of Mysie's, and they walked on for a bit hand in hand—a fashion Mysie favoured, perhaps as reminding her of holiday afternoons, when Arthur's big-boy companionship had been so flattering and delightful to the little school-girl. The air was scented with meadow-sweet and with hay; the elms, in full leaf, threw heavy shadows across their path; a thrush was singing; the church clock chimed half-past six; everything was full of peaceful beauty. Mysie looked shyly into

Arthur's eyes, and then they both laughed ; they were not really afraid or in suspense as to their fate, only Arthur wished that the decisive interview was over. ' Suppose, for the sake of supposing,' he said, ' that Hugh was really to act the cruel parent and send me away. What should you do, Mysie ? '

' I don't know,' said Mysie, lightly. ' If he locked me up I think I should give in to him.'

' Then I should blow my brains out ! ' said Arthur. ' I don't know why I am talking such nonsense,' he added. ' I know there is no reasonable likelihood of any interference ; but sometimes, Mysie, it comes over me to think what have I done to deserve, what so few fellows get—my first love—nothing in the way ? Everything in my life has gone well with me.'

' We must be very good,' said Mysie, in a low voice.

Arthur half shook his head. He was

not given to talk about himself, or even to think much about himself from a critical point of view, but he felt that life had been made uncommonly easy to him, by circumstances, by temperament, and by the lode-star of Mysie's love ; and it, perhaps, proved that he was not spoiled by prosperity ; since, with the stirring of the deepest feeling that he had ever known, there came a profound sense of these blessings and an almost exaggerated conviction of the absence of effort by which they had been attained.

‘ I have done nothing to deserve any of it,’ he thought. ‘ My work was pleasant to me. How could I go wrong with *her* before my eyes?’ The kind actions, the ready aid which won much affection, the quick interest in all around him which made him helpful and useful everywhere—what had these ever cost him? More pains, perhaps, and more virtuous effort than he remembered or thought worth mentioning ; but it was true.

that Arthur's was a gracious nature, so kindly and genial that, though his life had been singularly blameless, he had hardly been conscious of aims above the average.

Mysie cut into the heart of his perplexity.

‘I think it would be very ungrateful,’ she said, ‘not to be glad that we are happy. We should be very thankful to God for it, and try to make other people happy, too; and trials are sure to come in this life,’ she added, in her sweet, fearless, untried voice.

‘You shall have few, my darling, if I can keep them away. But you are right; and it would be strange, indeed, if one were not thankful—for you.’

‘The *Christian Year* says,’ said Mysie, in her free, simple way:

“Thankful for all God takes away,
Humbled by all He gives”—

‘That is what you meant, isn't it?’

Arthur listened, half in admiration of

Mysie's goodness—he thought, as others like him have done, his lady-love so good—and half with the shyness of young manhood of devotional, apart from theological, language.

‘Nothing so saintly, I fear, as that,’ he said. ‘But I see what the last part means. What!’—as Mysie started and shrank up to him—‘not afraid of cows, still, my little one!’

‘N—o,’ said Mysie, doubtfully, as half-a-dozen cows and a couple of woolly little calves turned out of a field, noisily and quickly. ‘No; it is very silly, and I am almost cured; but I did not expect them.’

Arthur put a protecting arm around her, very willing to forgive the fear that made her cling to him.

‘Flossy does tease me so about it; but I shall always hate cows and strange dogs and guns,’ said Mysie, in whom a sort of

physical timidity contrasted strangely with her quiet self-possession in other ways.

‘ You must not walk by yourself if they frighten you, darling,’ said Arthur; ‘ but these are very harmless beasts. Come, here’s the garden-gate—and there’s Hugh. Tastes differ, but a herd of buffaloes would be a trifle ; here goes ! ’

Mysie vanished, and Arthur advanced towards his cousin, into whose ears Mrs. Crichton had already poured the whole story.

Hugh had listened, but he was annoyed and unsympathetic.

‘ Arthur is too young.’

‘ Oh, my dear Hugh, so much the better. Your dear father was very little older, and I only wish I could see you——’

‘ Mysie has a right to a wider out-look.’

‘ But, my dear, she quite *adores* him ; she always did. And she is the most con-

stant little creature. There cannot be a word against Arthur.'

'Oh, no; he is exceedingly well-conducted,' said Hugh, dryly.

'And what a pity to come between young people! It always does them harm, even where it's inevitable. Disappointments are very bad things.'

'Most people have to survive them. However, mother, if you are satisfied on Mysie's behalf, I can have nothing to say. I see Arthur. I'll get it over at once.'

Hugh crossed the lawn, but had he wished to win Mysie for himself he could hardly have felt a bitterer pang of jealousy than that which came upon him as he looked at Arthur's gladsome eyes and heard the proud satisfaction in his tones through all their embarrassment.

'I have nothing to say, Hugh, but that we have chosen each other. I think I can make her happy, and I will do my best to

be helpful to you, and to place myself in a less unequal position as regards her fortune.'

'As mother consents,' said Hugh, 'I cannot have a different opinion; but as regards the Bank, you must know your own mind, and I shall not consent to your taking any place there till you have taken time to consider of it. It is not exciting work nor satisfying, if you are ambitious.'

'I repeat,' said Arthur, 'I have chosen my lot in life. I want Mysie, and Oxley, and the Bank, if you'll have me; and Heaven knows I think myself a lucky fellow!'

'You know,' said Hugh, 'by the terms of my father's will you have the offer, but I should wish you to consider well of it.'

'Oh, I'll consider,' said Arthur, in rather an off-hand manner; 'but why lose time? And you'll be very busy and want help now Simpson's getting past his work.'

‘Thank you.’ Hugh paused, and then said, he hardly knew how ungraciously: ‘I shall not interfere with you: you can, of course, do as you like. I believe I ought to speak to Mysie; but, of course, you know what she will say.’

Arthur laughed joyously, little knowing how the gay, confident sound smote on Hugh’s ears.

‘You’re *very* good, old fellow,’ he said. ‘Don’t imagine I think my good fortune a matter of course. But I want to hear all your adventures. We have set upon you before you have even had your dinner, which is cruel. How many girls did Jem fall a victim to? Have you brought him home safe?’

‘Jem took very good care of himself. But, as you say, it is dinner time. I must see if my things have come.’

‘You’ve never wished me good luck!

Well, you have assured it to me, which is better.'

'Oh, yes,' said Hugh; 'I wish you joy, and certainly would not be the means of interfering with your good fortune.'

CHAPTER XIV.

SMOOTH WATERS.

‘—— the old June weather,
Blue above lane and wall.’

‘You are quite sure of your own mind, Mysie?’

‘Yes, Hugh. I am quite certain.’

‘Because I ought to set before you that you might do much better for yourself. You have seen very few people, and I ought not to let you act upon impulse,’ said Hugh, in the driest of voices.

Mysie had been prepared for this appeal; and, though she blushed crimson and kept her eyes on her lap, she replied, not by protestations, but by the arguments which

she thought ought to prove convincing. Hugh had called her into the study, a little room looking out on the garden, and more or less appropriated to himself. There was another room which all the young men shared when at home, and where pipes, guns, dogs, and books were to be found in wild confusion; but this was Hugh's sanctum, where he wrote letters and transacted business and possibly read the highly-respectable volumes that lined its walls. Mysie sat in a great leather chair by the window, with the flickering sun on her bright brown hair and the shadows of the roses on her gay green and white dress.

‘I know,’ she said modestly, but quite clearly, ‘that perhaps some one richer than Arthur might—might meet me by-and-by.’

‘Exactly,’ said Hugh.

‘But then, Hugh, you cannot be sure of

that, and what would it matter, when—when my mind was made up?’

‘If you know your own mind, Mysie.’

‘I might not know it if I had only just met him. People often make mistakes then. But—but——’

‘Well,’ said Hugh, kindly, as she stammered and stopped, ‘what is it, Mysie? Don’t be afraid. I only want to know your thoughts exactly.’

‘I think,’ said poor Mysie, though with much confusion, ‘that I ought to say them, as you seem to think it is I who have the advantage. I could never give Arthur up, and there will be plenty of time for you to see, as he says he thinks that—that—there must be a year at least. I would promise to tell you if I did change, and I should not mind not being *called* engaged to him, though he wishes it. I hope you believe me, because I know it depends on that.’

‘Yes, Mysie,’ said Hugh, ‘I believe you.’

You mean to say nothing can change your love for Arthur, no one could over-persuade you, no one could frighten you ; you are so sure of it and of him that you don't care for any outward tie to bind you ?'

'Yes,' said Mysie, rather appalled at the emphasis with which this speech was uttered, but holding bravely to her colours ; 'that is what I mean. For you see, Hugh, we know all about each other so well.'

'Then, Mysie, I shall not consider it necessary to make any opposition.'

Mysie got up and said : 'Thank you, Hugh,' and slowly moved away. She thought Hugh would have congratulated her and kissed her, as he had done all her life on set occasions ; but he let her go in silence, and, left alone, stood staring into the empty grate with bitter thoughts in his heart. Here was *this* girl had won her way by her own fearless confidence, her absolute trust in herself and her lover. How

fortune smiled on the wishes of this pair! How sure might Arthur be of his happy future! He turned restlessly round and, looking out of the window, saw Mysie run down the garden-path with flying feet, saw Arthur spring up from the grass, meet her, and draw her away into the shrubbery; heard the low murmur of their voices, and the gay, careless laughter, called forth by the reaction from Mysie's anxiety and suspense. It was but a fortnight since he, too, had laughed idly and carelessly over Violante's flowers; but a fortnight since he, too, had thought himself happy in his love. But he had lost his faith in the poor child who was all unknown and unvouched for, and she had had no power to stand up for herself. The difference between this perfectly simple, straightforward engagement and the foolish, impossible dream from which he told himself that it was well to wake struck him forcibly. It was the contrast between good and ill

fortune, between success and failure. There were times when Hugh felt utterly miserable, and when the profound silence in which his short, wild love-story was buried was intolerable to him—thankful as he was for it in cooler moments ; times when he longed so to hear Violante's name that he felt the wildest desire to tell his foolish secret. It is needless to say that he never did tell it, not being of a confiding nature ; but concealment is nearly as fatal, in many cases, to the temper as to the complexion ; and poor Hugh was unaccountably and unromantically cross. Why, when Arthur was teaching his Skye terrier to jump over a stick, did Hugh feel that if that little beast jumped over at exactly the same height once more he must wring its neck ? Why, when his mother complained that the rabbits had eaten her carnations, did he positively assert that no mortal rabbit could possibly have come near them. And was it not unworthy of him to feel so ex-

ceedingly irritated when Arthur produced the corpse of the offender, having shot it from his bedroom window the next morning in the act of eating the one remaining shoot? Why should he oppose the Mayor of Oxley on the subject of gas and the Rector of Redhurst about the new schools? He advocated neither physical nor mental darkness, and when he became aware that he was resting his objections on the colour of the bricks proposed to be used in the building he pulled himself up and gave in with a good grace. But, surely, anyone with ordinary self-control would not allow these trifles to irritate him. Hugh sometimes felt a dim suspicion that, though he had a very good self on the whole, controlling it was not his strong point. Moreover, Mrs. Crichton had made the engagement an occasion for a great deal of country summer gaiety, and Hugh was persecuted by croquet and archery parties, picnics and dances. He was usually

very particular in what he called 'doing his duty to society;' but now these things were intolerable to him; and, worst of all, perhaps, was the sunshiny, peaceful mirth of the happy love-story that was working itself out beside him. Arthur shrewdly suspected that there was something amiss with his cousin; but they were not on terms for him to invite a confidence, and he contented himself with the idea of consulting Jem, and by taking on himself, with unobtrusive goodnature, all the trouble of the many small arrangements that devolve on the young men of a country house in times of unusual gaiety, even to entertaining the visitors when Hugh might have been free from business and when a stroll with Mysie would have been far preferable to himself.

'Hugh doesn't like it,' he would say; 'and I think he's rather out of sorts; so we mustn't bother him.'

Hugh rewarded him by wondering how

he could care for such trifles, and by somewhat despising the comfortable, unsentimental terms of the two lovers, even while he envied them only too bitterly.

Doubtless they were enviable; for in between-times many a sweet morsel fell to their lot, and one shining hour rested in Arthur's memory in the days to come as the typical instance of the warm home-like sunshine, the every-day happiness, of the summer when he was engaged to Mysie.

Once upon a time—there seems no fitter beginning—on a still, hot summer afternoon, Arthur and Mysie went down the new-mown meadows to the water-side. They were going in a boat down the canal to where it joined the river at a place called Fordham Beeches, where Frederica and Flossy Venning were to meet them, having walked through the woods.

Oxley canal was but a canal. Its waters sparkled over no pebbles, revealed no pellucid

depths ; but to-day its dull and sluggish face reflected the ‘ blue, unclouded weather,’ and the slow oars splashed up living light. The speedwells were hardly faded, the pink bind-weed blossomed all over its grassy edges. The flat meadows were green as emerald. Pollard willows hung over one side, and brightly-painted barges were tugged along by the towing-path on the other.

Arthur rowed slowly, and Mysie sat, in her big straw hat, facing him ; and they talked of the time when they should live together in the old red-brick Bank House, in Oxley, unless Hugh married ; and then there were the pretty little villas on the Redhurst road. They talked of ways and means, pounds, shillings, and pence ; and laid their plans, and settled what they would and what they would not do ; and how, in a year’s time, Hugh would be satisfied of Arthur’s capacity and steadiness, and would admit him to that share in the Bank proposed for him by his

father. And, as they talked, they passed along the back of Redhurst village and past the turnip-fields, where the little partridges were beginning to run and flutter, and Hugh's bit of copse, where little brown rabbits were already taking their evening airing.

‘Too many by half,’ said Arthur, and Mysie declared that he was cruel, as their course was stopped by Redhurst lock, rendered necessary by the more broken ground.

The lock-keeper's little cottage, in a bower of vines, stood on one side ; and Mysie blushed as she sat in the boat, for the men smiled as they greeted Arthur and responded to his remark on the rabbits ; and the lock-keeper's daughter—a tall girl, with fair hair flying in the sun—laughed as she curtseyed and called her little sister to ‘look at Miss Mysie.’

‘Alice Wood sees us,’ whispered Mysie.

‘We can see Alice Wood,’ said Arthur, as the nursery-gardener’s smart seedsman strolled by with a parcel, and whispered to the girl, who turned off giggling, shy of the young lady, who gave her a half-sympathetic smile as the boat slowly sank down—down into the cool, damp shadow—down below the steep, dank sides, below the sparkling water—till the great doors groaned back and they shot out into light and sunshine and life again.

Mysie drew a long breath.

‘I am glad to get out,’ she said. ‘It seems like the bottom of the sea.’

Arthur laughed.

‘I am afraid we shouldn’t make many scientific discoveries here. It would be hardly like dredging the deep sea-water.’

‘Do you know,’ said Mysie, ‘I always think of the bottom of the sea as if it was like Andersen’s Little Mermaid, with beautiful shells and strange creatures and coloured

sea-weeds covering the poor drowned people like the leaves did the children in the wood?'

"Should toss with tangle and with shells," quoted Arthur. 'I don't think one associates the idea of rest with drowning.'

'Oh,' said Mysie, 'I did, after I read that story. It was my great favourite.'

'You must show it to me. But I say, my darling, look out! That old swan wants your blue ribbons.'

The great majestic swan, with white ruffled plumes and fierce writhes of his long neck, bore down fiercely on them.

'Now, he has come down the river from Redhurst,' said Mysie. 'Row faster, Arthur; he is horribly fierce, and, besides, the others will be tired of waiting.'

'Never mind them,' said Arthur, 'we shall be in the river in a moment, and then we're close on Fordham Beeches.'

So they sped on their way to where the canal joined the bed of the river, and here

the banks were broken and picturesque ; great yellow flags, and white star-like lilies grew in the shallow water ; and now the great grey boles of Fordham Beeches appeared rising from their carpet of bright brown leaves.

‘ There are the girls,’ said Mysie, waving her hand.

Arthur rested on his oars and tilted his hat back, with a sudden twinkle of consternation in his merry grey eyes :

‘ I say, Mysie, we’ve forgotten the basket !’

‘ Oh, my dear Arthur, what shall we do ? You called me to look at that horrid little tom-tit just as I was going to give it to you. The strawberries and *everything* ! And they have walked all these miles in the heat !’

‘ I know,’ cried Arthur. ‘ Don’t you say a word. I’ll settle it.’

And as they pulled into the landing and Flossy and Frederica ran down to meet them he called out :

‘ I say, Flossy, get into the boat. I’ve got

such a splendid idea. We'll go and eat strawberries at "The Pot of Lilies."'

' "The Pot of Lilies!" But you've brought some strawberries, haven't you? '

' Oh, never mind! It's such a jolly place. You can get a capital glass of beer there, and it's only fifty yards further on. Jump in, Freddie.'

' But, Arthur, are you quite sure it's proper? ' said Mysie.

' Proper? oh, dear, yes! No one there on a week-day.'

' Now, if you will humbly confess that you and Mysie forgot all about the provisions, and that you never thought of "The Pot of Lilies" till this moment, we'll come,' said Flossy.

' Flossy! I'll confess I never heard of "The Pot of Lilies" till Mysie mentioned that you and she rowed up here now and then of an evening! Come along. I'll take care of

you, and neither Hugh nor Miss Venning will come and *proctorize* us.'

'The Pot of Lilies' was a tiny public-house, so called from the lilies of the valley which were supposed to grow wild in Fordham Woods. It stood close by the water's edge, with a little landing-place of its own, and a quaint, small-paned bow-window hanging over the river. Bright flowers grew on every window-sill and the Lily sign-board swung overhead. On one side was a garden, where arches and arbours, twined with creepers, shaded one or two little tables; for here, on fine Sunday evenings, Oxley and Redhurst sometimes came to tea.

Arthur sprang out of the boat and went in alone; but, soon reappearing, said:

'Come along; it's all right,' and a very smiling hostess escorted the girls into the bow-windowed sitting-room while Arthur went to make his further arrangements.

There were china shepherds and great

shells on the mantelpiece, queer coloured prints of the Queen and the Duke of Wellington on the walls, which were broken up by endless beams and cupboards.

‘What a dear little room!’ said Mysie; and, though the floor was sanded and there was a faint odour suggestive of beer and pipes, perhaps this only gave a slight flavour of novelty to the situation.

‘I’m sure, Miss,’ said the landlady, addressing Flossy, who looked the most responsible of the party, ‘I only wish the gentleman had sent his orders beforehand, for in the middle of the week, you see, Miss, we don’t have so much company. If you’ll excuse me, Miss ——’ and she vanished in search of various necessaries.

Arthur soon returned, saying :

‘We’re going to have tea in an arbour. It’s a lovely spot!’

The three girls followed him down the little gravel path, bordered by box edgings,

to an erection which was termed by the proprietress 'the harbour,' and which was built of wood and partly shaded by an apple-tree. Monthly roses climbed up its trellis-work front; and stones, shells, and broken bottles were picturesquely disposed in heaps at its two sides. It contained some chairs and a round table, on which preparations for their meal were begun, and at present consisted of a cloth and a large mustard-pot. This was, however, followed by slices of ham, bread and butter, and water-cresses, and by some tea, which—as neither young lady would take on herself to pour it out—Arthur superintended, and which proved so atrocious that he substituted ginger-beer for the girls and some bottled beer for himself. They might have drunk the tea, however, rejoicing; for they hardly knew whether the setting sun on the river or the steel forks and the great tall tumblers were the most delightful, so full of merriment were

they at this unusual and amusing festivity, and they afforded quite as much amusement as they received; for hearty landlady and pretty barmaid knew well enough who these blushing, smiling, well-dressed young ladies were, and that Mr. Arthur Spencer, of Redhurst, was engaged to one of them.

Presently strawberries and raspberries and currants, red, black, and white, appeared on the table.

‘Mysie,’ whispered Arthur, as he helped her to the fruit, ‘the Oxley folk always come out here for their wedding trip. If they’re very swell they stay a week. Shall we follow their example?’

Mysie, of course, blushed and bridled, and Arthur said aloud :

‘I propose we come and have tea here every summer. This is the 15th of July; let us remember it next year.’

‘Perhaps it will rain next year,’ said Frederica.

‘Then we will have tea inside the bow-window. What, Mysie! you’re not looking at your watch? It’s *not* time to go home.’

It proved, however, time to think of it; and after a little more lingering and a few more raspberries the four took boat again. Flossy and Frederica rowed home through the soft summer twilight, while Arthur and Mysie sat side by side in the stern. Mysie sang a melancholy little song about ‘days of old,’ and how

‘The sky was blue in the days of old,
But now it is always grey;’

and then they all laughed at the way they would describe what Arthur called ‘their little summer outing’ to the home party, for the sentiment of Mysie’s song found no echo in the heart of any one of them.

But the moon rose, and the boat came to land at last; they came home through the meadows; and the tea-drinking at ‘The Pot of Lilies’ was over.

CHAPTER XV.

OUT IN THE COLD.

‘Boys and girls, come out to play!’

So SANG Florence Venning as she danced down the empty school-room at Oxley Manor on the 3rd of August. The last young lady had driven from the door—even the French governess had gone to see her friends; and Flossy, whose devotion to the cause of education by no means precluded a thorough enjoyment of peace and liberty, sang and danced as she picked up stray school grammars and dictionaries and consigned them to a six-weeks’ imprisonment in the cupboard. Clarissa had been standing on a form to

reach its top shelf; and now she sat down on the desk, with her feet on the form, and yawned.

‘What are you going to do to-day?’ said Flossy.

‘Nothing,’ replied Clarissa, with emphasis. ‘I shall go to sleep, or read “Tom Brown”—that’s all about boys—or nurse the kitten,’ picking it up and kissing it, ‘which is babyish in a governess, you know.’

‘Dear me!’ said Flossy, ‘I shouldn’t care what it was if I liked to do it. Well, it’s nice to have some time to oneself. I shall draw hard. I shall go to the School of Art twice a-week, and see if I can’t get into the Life class; and I shall be able to help at the drawing classes they’re having down at Oxley National School. And I want to have a tea for my Sunday class—I wonder if Mary would! And I never do read anything steadily when the girls are here. Besides,’ with equal vivacity, ‘I want a new dress,

and must see about it; I think I'll do that first.'

'Anything else in a small way?' said Clarissa.

'Oh, fifty other things if I'd time to think of them.'

'Well,' said Clarissa, in languid, sleepy tones, 'I don't want to read a novel; there would be sure to be any number of girls in it! I'd like to be a man myself for the holidays, for a change. One would take an interest in girls then, at any rate!'

'Dear me, why *don't* you take an interest in them? I am sure forming the minds of others is the most interesting thing possible.'

'If one had a mind of one's own. *I* haven't.'

'Clarissa, I call that affectation. I don't consider you at all a stupid person.'

'Thank you,' said Clarissa, again kissing the kitten.

'Only you are so lazy. Now, will you

come into Oxley about my dress? You know we are to dine at Redhurst to-night.'

'Oh, Mary will go with you about your dress. Is James Crichton come home?'

'Yes, for a fortnight. I want to show him my sketches, and see those he made in Italy. Well, I'll try and get Mary; but I think she is busy. She has been writing to Mrs. Grey about a girl to come as governess-pupil.'

'That girl will be a bore,' said Clarissa.

'Now, really,' cried Flossy, in tones of virtuous indignation, 'I do think that's a shame. I am very glad of the opportunity. I disapprove of all the books that are written on that subject. They put it into girls' heads to pity themselves, even if they *are* true. And I intend that there shall be a tone here that will be quite different. Think what a chance it is for really helping a girl! I wish we could have two or three. I shall make a friend of her, and then see if the big

girls don't do so too. But if you go and have old-fashioned prejudices—'

'I won't make her do my hair, if that's what you mean,' said Clarissa, meekly. 'Well, Kitty, come along,' and, with slow, lazy steps, she sought the drawing-room, where she sat in an easy-chair with the kitten in her lap and read 'Punch.'

Flossy, finding that her eldest sister was not inclined to spend her first leisure hours in the hot walk to Oxley, got ready to go by herself. If Mysie Crofton's maiden bower was ordered and coloured by the quiet completeness and tasteful arrangement that marked all her doings, Florence Venning's afforded a proof of the variety and ambition of her aims and of the many hobbies that chased each other through her soul. With so many irons in the fire it was no marvel that some of them were apt to grow cold; that the plants and flowers, the arrangement of which she considered a form of art, and

in which she took great pride, sometimes wanted water ; that a chalk head was displaced, half finished, by a water-colour landscape ; and that the books in use at the moment were apt to tumble off the edges of her dressing-table, where they had sought a last refuge. Moreover, Flossy, in a severe fit of historical and artistic fever, had once painted the panels of her room with scenes from English history, set in frames of decorative flowers and scrolls. The flowers were pretty, but the historical heroes—though exceedingly creditable to Flossy's research and, indeed, to her powers of execution—were hardly up to the mark of the cartoons ; and their arms and legs, as her artistic knowledge increased, became a source of anxiety, if not of distress, though she could not resolve to have them hidden by what Miss Venning called a 'nice clean tint of buff.' At present history and heroes were finding an outlet on sundry pages of foolscap ; which, as Clarissa

observed, took up less room; and which reflected, perhaps, better the pictures of Flossy's imagination. With her head full of the newest and most successful, Flossy set off down the sunny road to Oxley. She walked fast, regardless that the heat deepened her pink cheeks to crimson—for Flossy had always rather more to do than her time permitted—and she walked well, with a free, bounding step, carrying her head well up in the air; with smiling eyes, satisfied with their own thoughts, yet ready for any diversion from them. The hero gave place to blue and white muslin and to a new hat. Flossy also arranged her intended drawing lessons, paid a call or two, transacted a little Sunday-school business, and came home in time to dress for the Redhurst dinner-party. She found Clarissa sighing over the family tea that was to be resigned in consequence; but sighs were of no avail in averting the

evil any more than were the grumbles of Hugh over the necessity of entertaining his neighbours. Miss Venning was always a pleasant and popular person. Her fresh complexion and her blue eyes, her handsome silk, and her pleasant tongue ornamented a party ; but Clarissa, though thought pretty, was regarded as more entirely the school-mistress, and, when so regarded, had little to say for herself. Flossy was too devoid of sentiment and of vanity and too full of her own concerns to be a favourite with young men. James thought her overpowering ; and though Hugh was at ease with her, no one ever having suggested that he ought to marry her—since Flossy, handsome as she was, was just the sort of girl who does not easily get credited with a lover—he rarely gave her a second thought. But she and Arthur were excellent friends, and she was much more intimate with the whole family

than was Clarissa, in whose younger days no girls had existed at Redhurst to afford an excuse for intercourse.

James had arrived the day before. He was warmly greeted by his mother ; and, as he congratulated Arthur and Mysie, was informed that Hugh had gone to a magistrates' meeting. Miss Katie Clinton, who was staying in the house, had been playing croquet in pink muslin with Frederica and the schoolboy George ; and as they all sat on the terrace at tea and Hugh's ordinary doings and sayings were mentioned, James began to feel an odd sort of discrepancy between his thoughts and the actual facts. ' Hugh had been rather astonished at their news. Yes, he gave very prudent advice ; but, still, he had given his consent.' ' Hugh did not want the new railway to come through Fordham : he was going to vote against it. Had he talked much about Italy ? Yes, a good deal. He had described Civita Bella

and the art galleries there, and the weather, and the Roman Amphitheatre.'

And presently Hugh came back, greeted Jem much in his usual way, and, sitting down, began to talk of his meeting, and how very foolish he considered his brother-magistrates' opinion of the matter in hand. James could not help staring at him. Could this be the Hugh who had declared to him in passionate language that life would be worth nothing without Violante? Had he *really* lectured, advised, and reproved, and altogether taken the upper hand of the brother now sitting before him? 'I could as soon call at Lambeth and lecture the Archbishop of Canterbury,' thought James. 'Surely he never begged and prayed me to take his part with the Mum! *Does* he remember it all as well as I do? He doesn't look altered.'

And yet James missed something that had been in his brother's face during that

brief fortnight they had spent together at Civita Bella. Lights and shadows had all been stronger then; the clear, sensible eyes had changed and softened, and the handsome lips, that Hugh would never hide by a moustache, had not been set so close together. As James turned his eyes away from this inspection they met Arthur's, looking at him curiously.

‘Well, Arty,’ he said, getting up, ‘come and have a smoke, and let's hear all about it.’

Jem and Arthur were much more companionable together than either of them was with Hugh, and now strolled down the garden, and after a little desultory talk Jem said:

‘Well, and what did Hugh say to you?’

‘I declare, Jem, I never was in such a funk in my life! Hugh said—just what he ought to have said, of course; but he wasn't gushing.’

‘No? And how has he conducted himself since?’

‘Well,’ said Arthur, ‘if it were possible that Hugh could have fallen a victim to some lovely black-eyed peasant, or—you didn’t meet any girls, did you?’

‘Nonsense, Arthur! Everyone isn’t in your predicament.’

‘Then the Bank must be shaky,’ said Arthur coolly.

‘Do you mean to say that Hugh is out of sorts?’ said Jem, after a little pause.

‘Well,’ said Arthur, more seriously, ‘I shouldn’t like to think that he was put out about Mysie and me; but everything rubs him up the wrong way. To give you an instance: You know there’s to be a great gathering to open the new Town Hall, and a concert and dinner. The Lord-Lieutenant is to bring his bride, and Hugh is on the committee. Well, I went to one of the meetings to represent the interests of Red-

hurst, as the villages round are to send their choirs and school-children to sing "God Save the Queen" in the square outside. So I went to see that our people were provided for, and also to get good places for Aunt Lily and the girls. There were the rector, and Sir William Ribstone, and the mayor, and everyone else. You never heard anything like the way in which Hugh bothered them. Not a suggestion would he let pass without pulling it all to pieces, till they came to a perfect deadlock. Hugh was perfectly civil, but cantankerous enough to drive the old gentlemen frantic, and generally he knows exactly where to give in. I thought he was over-worked, and begged him to let me begin going to the Bank; but he *will* say I shall not pledge myself without due consideration; which, you know, Jem, is really enough to drive a fellow wild! Consider? As if I hadn't considered! He seems to think one can never cease to be a boy!' concluded Arthur, viciously.

James laughed. He would much have liked to confide the story to Arthur ; but somehow he felt that Hugh regarded it so seriously that he could not tell it as a good joke, in which light Arthur, never having seen Violante, would be almost sure to regard it. A few hours soon showed him the truth of his cousin's remarks. Hugh, though somewhat condescending, was generally courteous and obliging enough ; but the captious way in which he complained of the approaching dinner-party, and the spiteful comments he made on Miss Clinton's manners and looks, his scornful laugh at Arthur's open boyish love-making, were the spray that indicated the waters of a bitter fountain. But he did not soften, even to his brother ; on the contrary, with defiant bravado, he referred to the subject, asking James if he did not triumph in the result of his predictions that all would soon be as if his foolish fancy had never come to disturb him.

James was not a person to stir the waters, even with a view to their final sweetening. He disliked a fuss too much to face the matter out. He did not sympathise with the feelings which he supposed to exist in Hugh's breast; it was better to suppose the thing a trifle, after all; so he answered:

'Oh, well, no one's the worse for a bit of romance in their life.'

'To supply them with pleasant memories, eh? You've hit it exactly.'

Hugh said no more, but a sense of contempt for the brother who was his only confidant added to the loneliness that oppressed him. In this humour, to sit down to dinner with Mrs. Harcourt on one side of him and Miss Clinton on the other seemed intolerable thralldom, and every subject more unprofitable than the one before it. He was so inharmonious a host that the discussion on local politics grew rather warm, though Mrs. Crichton sat smiling through any amount of

‘gentlemen’s talk.’ James wondered how anyone could excite themselves over drainage and rights of way; and Arthur strenuously entertained the neglected ladies on either side of him, glinting in between-times at Mysie as she sat far away on the other side of the table. He was the first to propose music after dinner, and Flossy was the first lady to accede to his request.

She stood up, erect, fair, and rosy, and began to sing, clearly and correctly, her last Italian song: ‘Batti, batti.’

Flossy was tolerably self-confident. She had a good voice and ear, and she sang her Italian better than is usual with young ladies, sure of applause at the end. She little knew how her first notes startled two of her audience. James gave a great jump. ‘Profanation!’ he murmured, as he thought of the exquisite voice and accent in which he had last heard the words uttered, of the lovely scared eyes that had so belied their

meaning. Jem smiled and sighed and drew nearer to listen, full of the 'associations' of the song, even while he glanced round to see how his brother had taken it.

There is a vast gulf between passion and sentiment, and Hugh was too much under the dominion of the one to endure the other. He did not wait for the second line of the song, but turned and escaped from it out into the warm twilight garden, where the clear, strong notes pursued him relentlessly. He sat down on a bench and hid his face in his hands. 'Violante! Violante!' he cried, half aloud. 'Oh, what a fool I was not to wait one moment longer! Then I should have been *sure*! What is the use of it all'— And then Hugh got up and laughed, keenly conscious of the absurdity of sitting here in his dress-coat lamenting; hating himself for his folly, and yet haunted by the old, soft accents: 'I was frightened, Signor Hugo.'

Suddenly the quiet garden seemed filled with chattering and laughing. All the younger ones had streamed out on to the terrace, and were wandering about in twos and threes. Arthur had Mysie to himself at last, and as they wandered past Hugh's hiding-place, he heard her say, mischievously, something about 'Katie's charming conversation,' and Arthur retort with 'That curate that was sitting by you ;' and then she threw a rose at him and they both laughed, till Hugh muttered passionately to himself: 'I wish I had never got to hear them play the fool and laugh again.'

CHAPTER XVI.

SUNDAY AND MONDAY.

‘There is no time like spring,
Like spring that passes by ;
There is no life like spring-life born to die.’

HUGH CRICHTON was at this time in the sort of humour which, dignified by the name of misanthropy, would have admirably suited one of those interesting and uncomfortable heroes who stalk through the pages of romance with masks over their faces, under a vow to speak to no one ; or who, like Lara, cloaked and with folded arms, look on at life from an altitude of melancholy and disenchantment. The world seems to have watched such vagaries in former days with

much patience ; but times are changed, and Hugh had far too much to do to fold his arms, and was forced to put on a frock-coat and white waistcoat on Sunday morning as usual. But an invisible and impalpable mask may be as stifling as one made of black velvet ; and the mysterious silence which everyone respected was scarcely a greater effort than the silence of which no one was to suspect the necessity, or the words that seemed so trivial or so foolish. In truth, it was as much to avoid Arthur's constant companionship as for any other reason that Hugh had so persistently refused to allow him to begin his work at the Bank. He could not stand Arthur's bright, shrewd eyes upon him as they went to and fro, or endure his notice of the fits of idleness which alternated with the hard work to which he thus condemned himself. For after his long absence he had more on hand than usual ; and Arthur, who was brisk and business-like and

just then full of an energy that would have made stone-breaking light and interesting work, might have been very helpful to him. Hugh did not, perhaps, dislike the notion of being overworked ; but the fact that he was so did not tend to smooth his temper or to raise his spirits. For, of course, the life of a man of business, with all the calls and occupations of a country gentleman added to it, was an exceedingly laborious one ; but it was Hugh's pride that he had never shirked any of the work to which his father had been born, and that he made the squire give way to the banker where the two clashed.

James, on growing up, had so decidedly declared in favour of a London life that all notion of his coming into the business had been abandoned ; but there was more since his father's death than Hugh could properly manage ; and so his determination that no pressure should be put on Arthur if his success at Oxford induced him to wish for a

more ambitious career had been a real act of kind and liberal judgment. His refusal to accept at once Arthur's decision in his favour sprang partly from a foolish and unworthy pride, which refused to be the better for anyone's sense or good behaviour, and, partly, as has been said, from a sort of personal distaste to his bright young cousin—a feeling which Arthur had done nothing to deserve. Nor was his brother's presence any satisfaction to Hugh. Now that the danger was past, James was quite ready to forget all the annoyance with which he had regarded the matter, and to find the recollection of so romantic an incident rather pleasant than otherwise. 'What is it to him?' thought Hugh bitterly; but it was quite true that, even had James been himself concerned and had sincerely felt the disappointment, he would have taken a certain pleasure in recalling the picturesque aspects of the affair; could have laughed at himself 'with a smile

on his lip and a tear in his eye ;' have made full allowance for Violante's difficulties, and even speculated a little about her future lot, honestly wishing it to be a prosperous one. He found room for kindly sentiment in his flirtations, and would have derived amusement from the externals even of a real passion. But Hugh's equal judgment fell before the force of personal feeling ; and as he had thought of nothing at the time but Violante herself his brother's view of the matter seemed to him utterly heartless and frivolous.

Sunday was a pleasant day to the young people of Redhurst. Mr. Harcourt, the Rector, was a very old man, who had christened their mother, and to whom 'Mr. Spencer, of Oxley Bank,' meant their grandfather. He was still fully capable of managing his little country parish ; and though they had heard his sermons very often, and had not had the satisfaction of assisting at many improvements in his church—since the work

had been well done for them in a former generation, when Mr. Harcourt, now so cautious, had been regarded as a dangerous innovator—they were very fond of him and of his wife ; and had any one of them, in a foreign country or in future years, recalled the Sundays of their youth it would have been the unaltered and seemingly unalterable services of Redhurst Church and its white-haired Rector that would have risen before their eyes. Not but that they liked a walk to Oxley and an evening service at the new St. Michael's considerably better than an afternoon one at Redhurst ; but, whether they deserted his second sermon or not, they rarely failed to present themselves at the Rectory after it was over for a cup of tea and a chat. Indeed, it was almost a second home to Mysie, who had grown up to be the young lady of the village—all the Miss Harcourts having married almost before she was born. Hugh was a very useful and conscien-

tious squire ; his mother, by nature and position, a Lady Bountiful : so Redhurst was a favoured spot.

‘ So you come and eat my apricots, young people, and run away from my sermons ? ’ said Mr. Harcourt, as he picked out a specially-perfect specimen of the fruit in question and offered it to Mysie, who, with her smiling face peeping out from a sky-blue bonnet, looked much like a bright-eyed forget-me-not.]

‘ I’ve been to church and to school, too, this afternoon,’ said Mysie, with a deprecating look.

‘ Ah, you are always a good girl. Why didn’t you bring Arthur with you ? ’

‘ She wouldn’t let me come to the Sunday-school,’ said Arthur. ‘ She says the girls laugh at her. So you see, sir, I can’t be useful if I would.’

‘ For shame, Arthur ! Mr. Harcourt, he did not want to be of any use, only to walk down with me.’

‘Well, my dear, in my young days we liked a walk with our sweethearts on Sundays.’

‘And I am going to walk with him to Oxley,’ said Mysie, slipping her little hand into the old Rector’s arm and very little discomposed by his joke.

‘Ay, ay, walk away, and come back and tell me what fine things they’re doing at St. Michael’s. There is Hugh has never told me a word about Italy. When young men made the grand tour formerly their conversation was quite an enlightenment to their friends.’

‘Weren’t they rather a bore, sir?’ said Arthur.

‘We weren’t so easily bored in those days, my dear boy, by useful information.’

‘No,’ said James, ‘those were the days to live, when each event had time to round into its proper proportion—the days of taste and leisure, when people were simple enough

to be excited by a Christmas party or by the coming in of a coach.'

'But don't you think, Jem,' said Mysie, 'that they must have been rather dull to care about the coach coming. I've heard Arthur say he used to go at school on a wet half-holiday and watch the trains. I'm sure he wouldn't have done it if he had had anything else to amuse him.'

'Very true,' said Arthur.

'Well,' said Mrs. Harcourt, 'when I was a girl I used to read Sir Charles Grandison, but I took it down the other day and found it very lengthy.'

'Such a prig as Sir Charles Grandison never can have really existed,' said Hugh.

'Well, Hugh,' said the Rector, with a humorous twinkle, 'we none of us know what we might come to under favourable circumstances. But, now, what day do you think to-morrow is?'

‘Your wedding-day, Mr. Harcourt,’ said Mysie, after a moment’s pause. ‘I remember it was on Sunday last year, and you gave Mrs. Harcourt an apricot.’

‘Ah, you’re the little girl for a good memory. Our golden wedding. Yes, it’s fifty years ago that I married Mrs. Harcourt, and she wore a dark green riding-habit for the occasion. Fifty years to be thankful for!’

‘Fifty years ago!’ said Mysie, rather awestruck.

‘Yes,’ said the Rector’s wife, ‘and we have asked the school-children to come up after school and drink our health; but not having such a good memory as Mysie I have forgotten some of them. If you could ask the little Woods, my dear, and the Masons to-morrow I should be glad.’

Mysie promised to do so, and distant chimes sounding on their ears reminded them that it was time to start for Oxley.

Hugh and his mother went home, the old couple went slowly up their sunny garden-path together, while the young pair, lingering a little behind their companions, looked back and smiled.

‘There’s our model, Mysie,’ said Arthur, as he drew her hand through his arm. ‘In fifty years’ time ——’

‘Oh, don’t, Arthur!’

‘Why not?’

‘It frightens me to think of fifty years,’ said Mysie, with quivering lips. Then suddenly she said, ‘I wonder which are the happiest, they or we!’

‘Let us go to-morrow and ask them,’ said Arthur, more lightly, perhaps, than he felt.

‘Oh, yes! Let us go the first thing to-morrow and take them some flowers ready for their breakfast—they always breakfast at eight.’

‘Very well,’ said Arthur, ‘and they will give us some breakfast. I promised George

to take him out shooting to-morrow—the rabbits are really getting intolerable. I want Hugh to come home early and join us.’

They soon reached St. Michael’s and dispersed in search of places, for the church was crowded. Arthur and Mysie had the good luck to find them side by side. Mysie’s feelings had been somewhat disturbed by what had passed, and she was glad of the quiet and of the service, which took her out of herself. The sermons at St. Michael’s were considered striking, and this one was about thankfulness. ‘He giveth us all things richly to enjoy.’ Mysie listened, and thought that she had more to be thankful for than anyone in the world; and she turned her listening into a prayer that she might never forget it. Arthur listened too, but his thoughts were less defined and were pervaded by a certain sense of the prettiness of Mysie’s face in its blue setting.

And then they stood up and sang—

‘Brief life is here our portion,
Brief sorrow, short-lived care;
The life that knows no ending,
The tearless life, is *there*.’

Brief? And yet they might keep their golden wedding after those long fifty years!

Fifty years of going to church together, of sorrows shared and joys doubled! And as Mysie’s heart went forward to what those joys and sorrows might be it was no wonder that she walked home hushed and silent, though there never came to her a moment’s doubt of how she might regard her young lover after the fifty years were past.

The morning light brought the golden wedding before her in a more cheerful aspect, and she had gathered most of her flowers and was arranging them in a large basket before Arthur joined her, accusing her of being unnecessarily early.

‘Oh, I wanted to gather plenty. Look. I have put the hothouse flowers in the centre,

and then the outdoor ones, and ferns round the edge.'

'And what's that?'

'That is a note from Aunt Lily to ask them to come up to dinner to-night. It is all ready now.'

Arthur took up the basket, and they went down the garden, out at a side-gate, and across the road into the almost adjoining garden of the Rectory. This was small, but within walls, and so gay with flowers as to seem to render Mysie's gift unnecessary. Arthur gave her one side of the basket, and they came across the lawn in the bright morning sunshine up to the open French window of the dining-room, where Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt had already perceived them.

'Here comes the young couple to see the old one!'

'We have brought you some flowers.'

'We have come to wish you many happy returns of the day,' said both at once.

Mrs. Harcourt took the flowers, and her

husband, kissing Mysie, held out his hand to Arthur.

‘God bless you, my dear children, and give you fifty such happy years as He has given to my wife and me!’

‘Amen!’ said Arthur, and he turned, and, drawing Mysie towards him, he kissed her, as if the blessing had been the seal of their betrothal. The tears came into her eyes, and she was glad to turn to the old lady to be praised and thanked for her beautiful flowers.

‘Now, then, of course you are come to breakfast? Arthur, when you were a little boy you always liked my pine-apple preserve; so I shall get you some.’

‘At his present stage of existence, my dear, I should think he would rather begin upon eggs and bacon.’

‘But don’t forget the jam for a finish, Mrs. Harcourt,’ said Arthur.

So they sat down and had a merry breakfast, lingering over it till Arthur jumped up, saying :

‘I must go home to catch Hugh before he goes to Oxley, to ask him where we shall shoot.’

‘But you are not going to carry away Mysie?’

‘Oh, no,’ said Mysie. ‘I don’t like the neighbourhood of guns at all, and I must stay to put my flowers in water.’

‘Very well, then, I’ll leave you. Mr. Harcourt, we shall see you to-night.’

Mysie stayed behind, and arranged her flowers and renovated Mrs. Harcourt’s dinner-cap, by which time the morning was so far advanced that she was persuaded to stay to lunch, before going to give the forgotten invitations. Meanwhile Mrs. Harcourt entertained her with much pleasant gossip about the days of her courtship and the wedding that had followed it.

‘Did not fifty years seem a long time to you then?’ asked Mysie.

‘Well, my dear, I don’t think I looked forward to any special time, or to any end

at all in those days. And I don't now, Mysie—I don't now, in another sense, for fifty years is a very little bit of eternity.'

The old lady spoke rather to herself than to the girl; but the words chimed in with Mysie's previous thoughts.

'I think,' she said, dreamily, 'you *are* the happiest. If Mr. Harcourt were to die you would have such a little while to wait; but if Arthur —— It's almost all *life*, if it is but a little bit of eternity.'

'Die, my dear? What has put such sad thoughts into your head this bright morning?'

'I don't know. But I shall remember this morning as long as I live.' Then, shaking off her sadness, she started up, and, kissing the old lady, went off rather hastily on her errands.

The everyday occupation soon chased away the solemn thoughts that had oppressed her, and having disposed of her other busi-

ness she went down to the canal, along the bank, and across the gates of the lock—the unrailed condition of which was one of those grievances which are always talked of and never remedied—to the lock-keeper's cottage, where she gave her message about the health-drinking; and sent two little girls, who were at home from school, off in a great hurry to join their companions. These children were motherless, and Mysie took great interest in the pretty sister Alice, who had charge of them.

The youngest boy was ill, and Mr. Dickenson, the Oxley doctor—who was most favoured at Redhurst—was paying him a visit. Mysie heard his opinion, and promised sundry delicacies to assist the child's recovery.

‘Then you will send the children down to the Rectory, Alice?’ she said.

‘Yes, Miss Mysie. I can't come with them, because of Freddy.’

‘No, of course not. Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, miss.’

Mysie tripped out into the sunshine, and on to the gates of the lock, Alice thinking how pretty her white dress and muslin-covered hat looked on this hot August day. ‘She always wears her prettiest things now Mr. Arthur’s here,’ she thought, when the sudden loud report of a gun sounded from the copse close at hand. Alice gave a little scream and start. Mysie, half-way across, started violently also, and, either losing her balance or catching her foot on the rough surface, slipped and fell, out of the sunshine, out of the light, down into the cold, dark water below.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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